7
CHRISTIAN FLOOR MOSAICS
Modes of study and potential meanings

Rina Talgam

Mosaic floors are a modest artistic medium that does not bear comparison in its content with the wall mosaics that once adorned the important and wealthy churches of the Christian world. Given the restrictions that Christians imposed upon themselves with regard to what was worthy of depiction on areas where people would tread, the creators of the floor mosaics were obliged to adopt a more limited repertoire of motifs of a secular nature. Mosaic floors lack contents comparable with those located on wall decorations and even those presented on sarcophagi and Christian miniature art. The great importance of the floor mosaics stems, first and foremost, from their extant quantity and good preservation. While the ceilings and walls of ancient buildings have generally not survived, their debris, which covered the pavements, helped to preserve the latter. The number of Christian floor mosaics that have been discovered in churches and chapels in cities, towns, and villages, as well as in monasteries and in the sumptuous homes of the affluent, is extremely large. Mosaic art flourished especially within the Byzantine realm, but Christian floor mosaics also existed in the western regions of the Roman Empire. Christian use of mosaic floors continued without great change in areas that were later cut off from Byzantium at the time of the Muslim conquest. The discussion in this chapter will therefore also relate to Christian mosaics of the seventh and eighth centuries CE.

The floor mosaics of humble churches were generally made from stones obtained from the nearby surroundings and their installation was therefore simpler and cheaper. The floors of the luxurious churches, on the other hand, were decorated with colored pieces of marble—a common type of paving in the Roman period, mainly in public halls such as basilicas and bathhouses, although such floors are sometimes also found in private houses of the very wealthy. This method, which is known as opus sectile, called for the import of slabs of colored marble from afar. The upper parts of the walls in churches with opus sectile floors were often covered with glass mosaics portraying scenes featuring figures from the Holy Scriptures. In the more modest churches, murals replaced the glass mosaics, and there were churches in which only the apse was decorated with a mural or alternatively with an icon or cross.

The portrayal of a more limited repertoire of images on floor mosaics in churches raises the question of whether they counterbalance the meager preservation of the wall decorations. The answer to this question is positive. Mosaic floors provide much information that sheds light on significant processes in the fields of religion, culture, and society in Late Antiquity. This applies
Christian floor mosaics

both to the floor mosaics in churches and to those that adorned secular buildings of Christian patrons. A discussion of mosaics’ role, and what can be learned from them as historical documents about their period, necessarily distinguishes between those that adorn churches, chapels, and baptisteries, and those located in the private or public secular realm.

This short chapter will focus on the Christian mosaics adorning religious structures and offer a few brief comments about Christian mosaics incorporated in other areas. The mosaics that decorated the reception rooms in the homes of the wealthy and in public areas intended for secular affairs were made by the same artists who created the church mosaics. One can divide these mosaics into three categories that reflect various manners of response to the Classical heritage. Some patrons apparently saw no contradiction between their Christian religious identity and embracing the Classical heritage, as floors of the reception rooms in their homes were decorated with depictions from Greek mythology. Such depictions enabled people of means to give expression to their classical education (paideia). In most cases, this tolerance for mythological subjects should be regarded as an expression of Hellenism in Late Antiquity, which should be distinguished from religious syncretism. By contrast, other patrons adopted a more severe approach by giving preference to patterns with a neutral connotation over mythological depictions. The third group evidently blended themes from mythology with motifs originating in church mosaics or other Christian contexts. Striking examples of combining pagan mythology and significant Christian motifs are the Hinton St Mary mosaic (Figure 7.1) and the Frampton mosaic (both in Britain). Throughout the Roman world there is no example for the replacement of mythological depictions on mosaic floors in private dwellings by biblical scenes.

Figure 7.1 Mosaic at Hinton St Mary (Britain). Courtesy of the British Museum, London.
In order to understand the uniqueness of Christian floor mosaics one must compare them with their predecessors in the Roman Empire and to the mosaics of other communities, primarily those in synagogues. The earliest Christian mosaics presently known date from the end of the third century to the beginning of the fourth century CE. At the time when the first Christian mosaics were being produced, the tradition of Roman mosaics already had a long history. Roman floor mosaics were very common in the homes of the affluent, and less so in tombs and buildings of a public–civic character, such as bathhouses. Only very rarely are mosaics encountered in a pagan religious context. This practice changes in the fifth and sixth centuries. Floor mosaics continued to adorn wealthy homes, tombs, and civic buildings, but most of the mosaics decorated churches and synagogues, which raises the question of why floor mosaics became the preferred medium for decoration in Christian religious buildings and pushed aside other decorative fashions. The answer is that the change resulted from the transition in cultic buildings from extrovert architecture, in which believers generally remained outside the building, to introvert architecture that housed the community. As a result of this, attention shifted to the design of the interior from the exterior. However, another reason is the idolatrous association with sculpted, cultic images and their use for the decoration of temple pediments and niches, while two-dimensional painting and mosaic art had a more neutral connotation. The preference for painting over sculpture also found expression in Christian writings. The clearest expression of this is to be found in a letter written by Bishop Hypatius of Ephesos (in office...
from 531 to 538) to Julian of Artamytion, one of his suffragans. This preference was possibly also influenced by the fact that the first Christian assembly halls, prior to the declaration of Christianity as the official faith of the Roman Empire, were in domiciles that were adapted to serve as spaces for religious gatherings. A well-preserved example has been discovered at Kefar Othnay (Figure 7.2) near Legio (in ancient Palestine).

Another question considers which elements of the Roman mosaic tradition were passed on to the new religious context. The answer to this lies in the compositional features and themes depicted in the Roman mosaics. Despite the geographic spread of Roman art, there are notable differences between the mosaic traditions of the Greek-speaking East and the Latin-speaking West. The late Roman mosaics in the East maintained the tradition of the Greek *emblema* mosaic and are characterized by pictorial panels whose number could range from one to fifteen. A spectator viewing the floor was obliged to stand outside a panel and to move from a point located opposite its center to a point located opposite the center of the neighboring panel. The themes depicted in these panels were generally drawn from Greek mythology, theater, and philosophy. By contrast, the mosaics that were created in the Roman West in the second and third centuries CE are characterized by their simulation of a carpet decorated with a geometric or floral network in which figures were incorporated. In other cases, the figures are depicted against a white background and are spread out over the surface of the floor carpet in an entirely free arrangement or in registers without a frame. The common motifs on this type of mosaic floor are hunting scenes; agricultural labors; the personification of the seasons of the year, the months, and also the Genius of the year or Aion; depictions derived from the amphitheater, and those of edible objects (xenia). Mythological scenes appear only occasionally.

North African mosaics enjoyed great popularity at the end of the third century/beginning of the fourth century CE, and influenced the compositions and repertoire of mosaics in Italy and the eastern provinces of the Roman world. In many Christian mosaics decorating churches from the end of the fourth century/beginning of the fifth century up to the eighth century CE, one can discern the adoption of compositional ideas and motifs from North Africa. These mosaics featured geometric networks populated initially by animals and later also by human images engaged in hunting, agriculture, herding sheep, and even with the portrayal of xenia (edible objects seen to represent hospitality). The figured panels that characterized the Roman mosaics in the East were regarded as unsuitable for churches by the Church clergy and the Christian congregations, not only on account of their mythological content but also because these compositions suited triclinia or rooms in which the seats were arranged along the walls.

Even the adoption of motifs drawn from nature was cautious and carried out gradually. Many of the fourth-century churches are aniconic (Figure 7.3), as shown by Kitzinger and Maguire. In the few cases where figural motifs do appear within geometric or floral patterns, they are mainly fishes and birds. Texts written in the fourth century testify to the apprehension that certain animals would continue to be comprehended in their pagan significance, and that the adoration of the forces of nature, including the sun, the moon, the sky, the earth, and water would take the place of adoration of their creator. For most of the fourth century, aside from the reign of Julian the Apostate, Christianity enjoyed imperial support and eventually became the official religion of the Roman Empire, but the struggle against paganism did not end, and there was no place in church floors for images likely to be perceived as idolatrous. This began to change during the fifth century, particularly in its second half, as floor mosaics in churches began to lose their severe character (Figure 7.4), though some communities continued to create non-figured mosaics.

Figure 7.4  Mosaic with inhabited vine scrolls in a church at Aluma (in ancient Palestine). Courtesy of D. Varga.
In the Justinianic period, personifications of the seasons of the year, the months, the heavenly winds, the earth, the sea, the rivers of Paradise, and in one case even of Wisdom (Sophia) began to appear in the churches. Maguire sets an earlier date for this phenomenon and holds that these personifications started to appear in church mosaics as early as the second half of the fifth century, and the variety thereof increased in the sixth century.3

The personification of the sun is notable for its absence, appearing only once—in the yard of a monastery at Beth Shean (Scythopolis). Helios, who is featured in this mosaic, has been brought down from his chariot and is portrayed as a bust next to Selene, who equals him in size, at the center of the cycle of the months. Apart from this instance, the absence of the figure of Helios in Christian contexts stems from the tremendous importance of the cult of Sol Invictus in Roman polytheism up to the fourth century ce, and from his prominent appearance in the central panel in synagogues. In contrast to the use of personifications, depictions of figures from Greek and Roman mythology were regarded as unsuitable for the adornment of churches, and there was no change in this regard even in the time of Justinian.

The Christians’ attitudes towards images depicted on floors

The Christians adopted a perception, common in the Roman world, that the attitude toward an image is what determines its status. The Romans distinguished between cultic images, honorific sculptures, and profane (decorative) images mainly by the attitude toward them. Ritual and liturgical procedures marked the difference between cultic and non-sacred. Hence, it would
Christian floor mosaics have been problematic for Christians with a Roman background to depict scenes from Scripture or other holy images in places that were meant to be trodden on.

The Jews, who sought to heighten the distinction between synagogues and churches, chose a solution opposite to that of Christians regarding the placement of images. Depictions drawn from the Old Testament and the portrayal of the utensils of the Tabernacle and the Temple, which in the third century appeared on synagogue walls, appeared in floor mosaics at the beginning of the fourth century. Treading on these images made possible their use for didactic purposes but neutralized their sacred dimension. Many Jews adopted this course up to the seventh century, when the severe interpretation of the Second Commandment was readopted and Jewish art reverted to aniconism, as it was during the Second Temple period. Jews also differed from Christians by depicting Helios at the center of the zodiac in some synagogues in the land of Israel. This image began to appear as early as the second half of the fourth century and its use continued up to the end of the sixth century.

Only on rare occasions do we find an exception to the Christian perception that considered floor mosaics an unfitting place for the depiction of human figures from the Scriptures, as can be seen at Aquileia, Mopsuestia (Misis in Cilicia), three times in Syria, in Beth Guvrin (Palestine), in a mosaic of unknown provenance in the Louvre and in a baptistery at Pitsound on the shores of the Black Sea. Each of these examples requires separate discussion, since no single explanation can account for them all.

The exact dating of the twin basilicas at Aquileia is a controversial issue. Some hold that the northern basilica was built as early as the time of the Constantinian Edict of Toleration of the Christians, while others accept the date 313–319 for the entire complex. The northern building contains a depiction of mammals and birds and lacks clear Christian motifs. The floor mosaic of the southern basilica is made of nine carpets of equal size featuring geometric patterns populated by a plethora of motifs taken from nature and personifications or portraits of local donors, and a panel in the eastern part of the nave features a seascape with fishing boats. Incorporated in this panel are three scenes from the story of Jonah: Jonah being thrown from the boat into the sea and swallowed by the jaws of a fish; Jonah being cast up on the shore from the jaws of the fish; and Jonah lying beneath a hut of twigs on which a Ricinus vine climbs. The Jonah cycle enjoyed great popularity in early Christian art and often appeared on sarcophagi and murals in catacombs. Some scholars are of the opinion that the Jonah cycle at Aquileia was added to the existing seascape later on, while others consider that it was made together with the other depictions. Those supporting the view that the Jonah cycle was part of the seascape from the outset hold that the depictions of Jonah took the place of mythological depictions that were sometimes incorporated in seascapes in the mosaics of North African villas and bathhouses.

The questions discussed in the research literature with regard to this mosaic are: Why was the Jonah cycle chosen to decorate a church floor? Was the significance of the subject equal to that of its appearances in a burial context? Was its appearance in the new context accompanied by other layers of liturgical and theological significance? And was the number of fishermen in the marine scene (twelve) intentional? In order to answer these questions, one must examine the Christian interpretations of the story of Jonah during the period preceding the laying of the mosaic, and contemporary sermons on boats, fishermen and fish by peoples from the close surroundings, such as Chromatius, bishop of Aquileia (388–407). One must also ask whether the Book of Jonah was read as part of the liturgy and to what extent the community was acquainted with the text. Also worthy of elucidation is whether this mosaic was possibly in some way a reaction to the theological struggles and schisms that split the Christian world at that time.
More than two centuries later the Jonah cycle reappeared on the floor of a Christian church in the area of Beth Guvrin in Palestine. The geographical distance and time gap oblige us not to infer an influence from the earlier depiction at Aquileia. There was also a change in the visual presentation, and Jonah, who appeared naked on the early Christian sarcophagi and at Aquileia, was now depicted clothed. The mosaic at Beth Guvrin raises the question of whether the depiction of a biblical figure reflects the influence of the widespread custom in Palestinian synagogues of featuring biblical scenes in the floor mosaics.

At Mopsuestia a mosaic dated to the fifth century was discovered in a building with an asymmetrical plan, including a nave flanked on one side by a single aisle and on the other side by two aisles. The western part of the nave is decorated with Noah’s ark surrounded by animals (Figure 7.5). Surprisingly, this panel lacks human figures. The outer northern aisle was adorned with a series of nine (according to Budde) or eleven (according to Kitzinger) episodes from the life of Samson (Judges 14–16). The scenes are unframed and above each of them is a citation from the appropriate verse from Septuagint. This mosaic gives rise to several questions. Why did the members of the community choose to depict so extensively episodes from the life of Samson? Does this general format bear a relationship to an illustrated scroll, and, if so, why are the scenes to be viewed from right to left? And can one learn of the extent of the community’s literacy from the long text accompanying the decorations? In two recently excavated Galilean synagogues depictions from the life of Samson were discovered, and in one of them was found a portrayal of Noah’s ark, which, like the one at Mopsuestia, lacks human figures and features

Figure 7.5  Floor mosaic with Noah’s ark surrounded by animals, Mopsuestia (Turkey). Courtesy of the Center for Jewish Art, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem.
only animals. The thematic and iconographic similarity calls for a discussion of the contacts between the rival communities who shared a common religious text.

Three fifth-century mosaics from Syria, the best preserved one of which was found in the church at Huarte, depict Adam naming the animals. Adam is accorded the privileged location at the foot of the bema, on the axis to its entrance. He is seated clothed on a backless throne holding a book in his hands. Among the animals surrounding him are seen a phoenix and a gryphon. Maguire, who studied this group of mosaics, claims that the composition blends a liturgical and allegoric significance within a single image. The mosaic portrays Adam’s wisdom and glory, which before the fall saved him from the attacks of wild animals and which were to be restored to him by Christ. The depiction is located in a place that generally features pastoral images that represent the earthly Paradise, the entrance to which passes through the Church. Adam surrounded by animals is reminiscent of Orpheus and even more of David/Orpheus who appears on the floor mosaic of a synagogue in Gaza (Palestine). A fragmentary mosaic at the Louvre and a mosaic of a baptistery in the area of the Black Sea depict the three youths in the fiery furnace. This theme was one of the most popular Old Testament subjects in early Christian funerary art. The three youths in the furnace were considered prototypes of the early Christian martyrs, baptism and symbols of salvation.

The imperial edict of 427 banning the depiction of crosses on floors is indicative of a growing Christian sensitivity to the motifs portrayed in floor mosaics. A survey of archaeological finds reveals that this edict was put into practice, but not in an absolute manner. Relatively few mosaics feature crosses or a Christogram, not including crosses incorporated in the opening and closing parts of dedicatory inscriptions. Most of the examples known to us are from the fifth century, but one is not always able to determine whether they preceded the edict of Theodosius II. Nevertheless, examples from the sixth century show that the edict did not lead to the disappearance of this phenomenon, but its scope was more limited numerically and the crosses in places intended for people to walk upon were generally of a rather modest size. The perception that the treading on visual images or the refraining therefrom reflected the degree of sacredness of the depicted images and perhaps made possible the continued portrayal of mythological scenes on floors in secular contexts.

Deciphering the significance attributed to churches’ floor mosaics

None of the researchers has any doubt that the iconographic sources of most of the motifs depicted on floors of churches and chapels were secular and well known in Roman villas, but opinions are divided on the question of whether a significant change in meaning took place with their transfer from a secular context to a religious one, and whether one can attribute to them a Christian content and significance. Moreover, during the Byzantine period, many of the compositions and motifs were not exclusive to churches, but also appeared in synagogues and secular buildings. To what extent do depictions that resemble one another in form within the same geographical environment and in the same period also share a common significance?

In order to answer this question, one must clarify an even more basic issue: how should the significance of mosaic floors be explained? Anyone studying floor mosaics, like every art historian who seeks to comprehend the significance of a work of art in the historical, sociological, and cultural context in which it was created and functioned, is obliged to compare visual and textual media. Formalistic and comparative analysis of a work of art furnishes only partial information. One of the important questions confronting the art historian when attempting to
interpret the significance of visual images is which of all the known texts from the period and area under study can be linked with the particular work of art and shed light on it.

The answer to this question calls for the clarification of the identities of those who had the authority to determine the content of the church decorations. Was this authority vested in the hands of the person who financed the work or are we dealing with other bearers of authority, such as the local priest or a more senior Church institution? Another question that needs to be asked is what was the role of the artists in the formation of the decorative scheme? Also, speaking generally, how was consensus reached with regard to what was permissible and what was forbidden for presentation in a religious context? If one assumes that floor mosaics in churches were an expression of the popular art of simple folk or, alternatively, of the wealthy but uneducated patrons, one limits the use of texts representing the intellectual elite of that time. On the other hand, if one assumes that the decoration indicates the involvement of the intellectual elite, one faces the question of whether there were mechanisms to provide viewers with tools for an educated viewing that would ensure the correct interpretation. Moreover, due to the interactive nature of the viewing experience, one should discuss not only the creator but also the viewer. Are we in possession of sources that enable us to know how the images on the floor were conceived by the community that entered the doors of the church? Did the extent of the viewer’s education have an influence on the significance of a church’s decorative scheme?

The first impression one gains when studying the floors in Christian religious buildings is that, although they were generally created by local workshops that made use of stones familiar to them from the immediate surroundings, one can detect a considerable measure of uniformity. Notwithstanding the broad geographic spread, a limited number of types appears again and again over a period of 350 years. This was popular art that showed a large measure of conformity. But in no case was there absolute copying of an earlier floor, and one can suppose that in many cases the innovations are nothing but variations of existing themes. The consistency in decorative schemes indicates the existence of a norm regarded as suitable for the decoration of church floors. More than in a private context, an encounter with the accepted had great importance. Despite the repetition, the process that we are witnessing over a long time span is not in the direction of degeneration but was dynamic and innovative. A notable feature was the desire to maintain the delicate balance between deviation from the accepted and the desire to go deeper and diversify.

The answer to the question whether this was art that was motivated from above by the Church or from below by the masses is probably that we are dealing with a combination of the two. The dedicatory inscriptions in most of the communal churches in cities, towns, and villages bear testimony to the close cooperation between the donors who were members of the community and the holders of office of various ranks in the Church establishment. The bishop is generally mentioned at the beginning of the inscription as a denotation of the time but also in order to express his benediction for the act of the erection or renovation of the church. He is often followed by the priest; the deacon is also mentioned, followed by the donors who were members of the community. From this we learn that in the consciousness of the people of that time the laying of a mosaic was regarded as an enterprise shared by the Church authorities and the members of the community. Nevertheless, there is a possibility that the measure of power held by the local bishops in private chapels of the aristocracy was much weaker. An indication that patrons of churches consulted with Church authorities is the reply of St Nilus of Sinai (early fifth century) to the Prefect Olympiodorus when the latter intended to decorate his church with animals and plants. To this proposal Nilus answered: “I say that it would be childish and infantile to distract the eyes of the faithful with the aforementioned (images).”10 Evidence does
Christian floor mosaics

not support a sharp distinction between the categories of low culture (those coming from the masses) and high culture (originating in the church establishment) as influences on floor mosaics in churches.

The spread of the fashion throughout the Christian world was facilitated, inter alia, by the mobility of people. There is no evidence supporting the conjecture about the existence of pattern books of a set type, indicating the centralization and control of the floor mosaic programs by governmental systems or by means of “creation centers” or “schools.” However, artists could have been aided by sketchbooks that they created for the purpose of showing their repertoire to potential customers and as a guide for themselves. These pattern books could have been passed from father to son, assisting in the preservation and spread of artistic traditions. With regard to the floor mosaics in churches, one should employ the term “workshops” rather than “schools.” In the field of mosaics there are local phenomena, compositions, and motifs characteristic of certain areas, but the use of the term “school” in this context is misleading. The level of complexity of the mosaics could change from place to place and there are also areas in which one can discern a clear development over time from simple compositions to ones more complex and much richer.

The floor mosaics were intended to adorn the building and transform it into one that was pleasing and attractive, but in many cases it is notable how the floor mosaics helped to clarify the symbolism of the church building, explain the liturgy, and intensify the religious experience. The interior of the church served as a space for liturgical performance incorporating the movement of the clergy conducting the ceremony, as well as the movement of the community itself. Within the space of the church there was a hierarchy, and the area of the bema closed off by a screen was regarded as more sanctified than the nave and could be entered only by priests. These hierarchical relations often also found expression in the mosaic floors, as one can see for example in the Chapel of Theotokos on Mount Nebo or the Church of the Lions at Umm al-Rasas (both in ancient Arabia, present-day Jordan).

Visual art exerted an enormous influence on ancient society at the time when literacy was the lot of the few. Anyone living in the realm of Roman culture was surrounded by visual images both in public and in private spaces, and it is thus not surprising that the Church authorities hastened to adopt art and architecture as a tool for the education of believers and a means of heightening religious experience. However, visual images are often ambiguous and their interpretation is dependent on the choice, associations, and personality of the viewer. This is the secret of art’s charm but it can also be a source of its weakness as a didactic tool for conveying theological messages. In order to ensure the correct reading of the things that were observed, the Church establishment set up a supporting system that provided the broad public with the necessary information. These compositions belonged to various genres and they included sermons delivered on the occasion of the consecration of churches, ekphraseis (descriptions of works of art that reconstructed the experience of observation), and sermons meant to explain the liturgy and liturgical poetry. The importance attributed by the Church establishment to verbal means of directing the observers toward a proper understanding of architecture and visual representations is already notable in the opening remarks of the panegyric delivered by Eusebius, the bishop of Caesarea Maritima (in Palestine), at the time of the consecration of the new church building in Tyre.11

Although sermons, ekphraseis, and liturgical texts do not mention mosaic floors directly, they provide us with important keys for understanding the way in which the floor decorations were integrated into the general perception of the church. These texts, that were read to the broad public, reflect a multi-layered perception of the church by the people of the time: a
Rina Talgam

 communal institution, a cosmic temple, an earthly Paradise, and the successor to the Tabernacle and Solomon’s Temple. And the area of the bema, where the church’s altar was located, was regarded as heavenly Jerusalem. This is notable as early as the panegyric of Eusebius (315 CE), and a complex perception featuring additional layers of significance appears in the sermon delivered by John II, the bishop of Jerusalem, on the occasion of the consecration of the Church of Holy Zion (394 CE). John presents the complex symbolism of the church in seven metaphors: the church is heaven of heavens, heavenly Jerusalem, Paradise, Noah’s Ark, Mount Moriah, and the site of the Binding of Isaac; it symbolizes Jacob’s ladder, the Tabernacle, Solomon’s Temple and the Temple in the vision of Ezekiel, and the internal Tabernacle. Not all of these metaphors are reflected in floor mosaics of various churches. Some are more prominent and appear more frequently; some floors present only a single metaphor while others present a number of them simultaneously. Sermons and ekphraseis from the sixth century explain church architecture and decoration to the broad public.

The inscriptions incorporated in floor mosaics are generally dedicatory ones. In many cases they provide information about the time of erection of the church, the reason for its construction, and its administrative organization. Only rarely do mosaic inscriptions shed light on their artistic elements. An example is the basilica at Paphos Chrysopolitissa on Cyprus, dated to the fourth century. Portrayed in this mosaic is a vine medallion laden with clusters of grapes, and above it is a citation from John 15:1: “I am the true vine.” According to Maguire, this inscription was intended to draw a distinction between the vine in its Christian sense and that of the pagans, which was associated with Dionysos. Another example is the inscription around the image of Thalassa, the personification of the sea, in the Church of the Apostles

![Figure 7.6 Mosaic with the figure of Thalassa, the Church of the Apostles at Madaba (in ancient Arabia). After M. Piccirillo, The Mosaics of Jordan, Amman, 1993, with the kind permission of the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum in Jerusalem.](#)
Christian floor mosaics

at Madaba (in ancient Arabia). The paraphrase of the Psalm 115:15 (“O Lord God who has made the heavens and the earth”) was intended to make clear that the sea (Thalassa) depicted in the medallion was created by God who also made heaven and earth (Figure 7.6). A third example is the inscription in the northern transept of Basilica A at Nikopolis in Epirus. There are cases where the inscription on the floor relates to the significance of the entire building, as, for example, in Psalm 118:20: “This gate of the Lord, into which the righteous shall enter,” which appears in several churches. For believers partaking in the liturgy, the church opens the gate to redemption. In John 10:7 Jesus likens himself to a gate.

There are inscriptions that shed light on the significance of the bema, such as one in the Church of Sergius at Umm al-Rasas, which cites Psalm 87:2: “The Lord has loved the gates of Zion more than all the tents of Jacob.” The continuation of this Psalm relates to the city of God. Judaism (“the tents of Jacob”), including biblical Jerusalem, the earthly city in which blood sacrifices were offered, was banished in favor of the earthly church, “Israel in spirit,” that serves as a gate to the divine and eternal heavenly city (“Zion”). The area bounded by a screen and intended for priests thus denotes the gate to the Heavenly Jerusalem in the Earthy Church. In addition, there are several mosaics featuring an illustration of a biblical passage from the end of days prophecies of Isaiah or Psalms. These illustrations do not include depictions of human beings and are not narrative biblical scenes in the full sense. Examples of this can be found in a few churches in Turkey, Corsica, and the Church of the Acropolis at Ma’in (in Jordan).

Floor mosaics as a tool for clarifying the symbolism of the church and intensifying the religious experience

The church as a microcosm

The most frequent metaphor reflected in church floor mosaics presented the church as a microcosm, by representation of plants, birds, beasts and sea creatures. As shown by Mircea Eliade, this is a universal idea in religious architecture in general. The penetration of this idea into early Christian theology can be attributed to the influence of Philo and Flavius Josephus who gave an allegoric interpretation to the Tabernacle and its furnishings. Both of them regarded the Tabernacle as a simulation of the cosmos. Similar ideas appear in the writings of Origen and later in those of Theodore of Mopsuestia (350–428) and Constantine of Antioch (sixth century). The perception of the church as a microcosm appears in the hymn of the Edessa Cathedral, written in the time of Justinian. The depiction of the world in a church was intended to bridge the gap between two dichotomous approaches, termed by Smith as concepts of a “locative religion” (in which the worship of God takes place in an enclosed particular space) and a “utopian religious” orientation (in which the worship of God can take place anywhere). This dualism finds expression in the words of Maximus the Confessor who, according to a recent study, was active in Palestine.

Moreover, the depiction of the created world on the floors of churches reflects the power and sovereignty of God in the universe. From the sermon delivered by Cyril, the bishop of Jerusalem, to catechumens in the fourth century, we learn that the reference to the created world was part of the eucharist. Cited in the liturgy of St Basil are verses 5 and 6 of Psalms 146: “Happy is he . . . whose hope is in the Lord his God: which made heaven, and earth, the sea, and all that therein is.”
The church as a domus ecclesia and a domus dei

Beginning in the fifth century, the animals that were generally incorporated in the floral and geometrical carpets were joined by human figures engaged in agricultural activities and hunting, as well as images of donors. This was a natural development, since human figures were part of the repertoire of the North African mosaics that were the source of inspiration for many church mosaics. The incorporation of human figures engaged in activities of a rustic nature brought the depiction closer to the world of the community members and connected the everyday to the sanctified. The inclusion of donor portraits emphasized the character of the church as a communal institute. The donors appeared next to other images in the mosaic carpets decorating the nave and rarely in the aisles, but they were sometimes given a privileged position, such as in a separate panel at the foot of the presbytery or less often in the presbytery itself.

These depictions might also have been intended to harmonize the practice of constructing church buildings with the stance in the New Testament that downplayed the significance of the Jerusalem Temple and characterized the faith community itself as “the Temple of the living God” (2 Cor 6:16; cf. Acts 7:48–50; 1 Cor 3:9, 16). The perception that God is located everywhere at all times and that the adoration of which He is worthy is in the hearts of the believers and not in the place designated for this purpose encouraged the view that church buildings were not temples of the Divinity but places of assembly for believers. The community was hallowed, rather than the building in which its members assembled. This stance was also repeated by the Church Fathers. The idea that the physical structure of the church becomes an allegory of the spiritual church made up of the community of believers appears as early as Eusebius’ panegyric delivered at the time of the consecration of the church in Tyre.21

Yet Eusebius also used Temple terminology to refer to the church building, as did some of the inscriptions incorporated into floor mosaics.22 These testify that the Christians had an ambivalent attitude toward the church. The church was not only a domus ecclesia but also a domus dei. The following inscription appears at the center of the early church at Magen in ancient Palestine: “The holiest dwelling place of the Most High God is in the midst of her.” A ten-line inscription in the early church of Bahan in Palestine includes the following citation from the Psalms: “Holiness befits thy house, O Lord, forever more” (Psalm 93:5). The presentation of other metaphors for the church are much less frequent.

The church as an earthly Paradise

In the writings of the church fathers, the church is compared with Paradise. The presentation of Paradise in a church was achieved in one of two ways: A portrayal of the four rivers of Paradise by means of the use of personifications, generally as part of a Christian topographic depiction, as can be seen, for example, in the central panel of the Church of St Paul at Umm el-Rasas, which features Ge, the personification of Earth, surrounded by personifications of the seasons of the year and the four rivers of Paradise. The other way of presenting Paradise in a church was by means of the depiction of fruit trees, sometimes shown next to the donors, or of the comrade-ship between predators and their prey. Fruit trees were an important part of the Christian image of earthly Paradise that was based on Genesis 2:8–9.

The placement of most of these depictions in the presbytery close to the altar indicates that they had another significance connected with the church liturgy. The depiction of Paradise denotes the redemption that is the legacy sought by believers who participate in the Communion that takes place there. Anyone who takes part in the church sacrament ensures his entry into a world that has been redeemed from the ancient sin. The crucifixion of Jesus, which according
to a church tradition took place in the same place where the first man was created and buried, purified humanity from the original sin and opened the way for its redemption. The eucharist ceremony on the church altar restores the community of believers to the lost Paradise. The appearance of the rivers of Paradise close to the baptismal fonts is also of liturgical importance. The baptismal font takes the place of the “fountain of life” whose waters fed the rivers of Paradise. This Christian perception of the spring stemming from Paradise is based on what is said in Genesis 2:6 and 10.

**The church as the successor of the Tabernacle and the Temple**

The words of praise delivered by Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea in Palestine, to Paulinus, bishop of Tyre, during the consecration of the new church building revealed that, as early as the fourth century, the Christian basilica was symbolically regarded as the successor to the Temple of Solomon. The perception of the church as the successor of the Tabernacle and the Temple recurs in the fifth to sixth centuries in the words of praise uttered at church consecrations and in dedicatory inscriptions. Thus, for example, Choricius of Gaza ends his oration, which was probably delivered at the consecration of St Stephen’s Church in that city, by comparing the church building with the Jewish Temple, saying that if the church in Gaza had competed against the world’s most famous temple, it would undoubtedly have won. And a hymn for the cathedral of Edessa (mid-sixth century) reads: “Bezalel it was who, instructed by Moses, erected the tabernacle to serve us as a model.” An arrogant statement by the church’s patrons about it being superior to Solomon’s Temple also appears in a dedicatory inscription in a church that was built by Anicia Juliana in Constantinople. Shortly thereafter, in a kontakion composed for the re-consecration of the Hagia Sophia Church in Constantinople in 562, the building project was compared with that of Solomon.

During the fifth and sixth centuries we also see a visual expression of these perceptions in Christian floor mosaics. Generally, these depictions would be located close to the liturgical foci. In churches with a regular plan, depictions of this type would appear at the foot of the church’s bema. In Syrian churches with a central bema for the reading of the Holy Scriptures (which preceded the eucharist ceremony), these depictions are located at the foot of the bema at the center of the nave. In the vicinity of the altar or bema appear a pair of bulls or sheep, an allusion to the blood sacrifices that were offered in the Temple in Jerusalem. Here we are dealing with a typological depiction, since such sacrifices were replaced by the eucharist ceremony that was carried out on the church’s altar. In the Chapel of Theotokos on Mount Nebo (in ancient Arabia), between the two bulls appears a sketch that is a combination of the plan of the Temple in Jerusalem and a church building, as suggested by the apsidal end and the small structure located at the center, which can be understood as a ciborium above the church’s altar. A citation from Psalm 51:19 was added to this depiction: “then bulls will be offered on thy altar.”

**The significance of special motifs**

In addition to examining the ways floor mosaics related to the theological significance of church buildings, one should pay attention to the significance of a few of the motifs that were incorporated in mosaics. Various animals such as a fish (whole or halved), a ram (Figure 7.7), an eagle, a sheep, a bull, a peacock, a phoenix or a plant like the vine could have had a very important symbolic significance. Some of them were regarded as images symbolizing Jesus himself. However, as indicated by Henry Maguire, artistic motifs are not mere signposts and their meaning is not unequivocal. One can often discern in them a number of layers of significance and intentional ambivalence.
It is possible to determine the primary significance of a motif by examining its location in the entire composition and within the architectural space, its size, the sequence of motifs in which it is incorporated and the way in which they interrelate, and the elements that are integrated into the image itself and serve as pointers. Thus, for example, a ram depicted next to a tree to which he is tethered or stands in front of in a composition that creates the shape of a cross would allude to the ram in the story of the Binding of Isaac, which prefigures the crucifixion of Jesus. When such a depiction appears close to the church’s altar it will also take on a liturgical significance. The portrayal of two rams flanking the altar or a sacred façade could refer to the two covenants and to the daily sacrifices offered in the Temple in Jerusalem, which were replaced by the eucharist ceremony.

Some floor mosaics reveal that by means of animal images and topographic elements it was possible to create compositions that were not inferior to the wall mosaics in their complexity and the importance of the message conveyed by them. A mosaic of this type is the one located at the foot of the central bema that was used for the reading of the Holy Scriptures in the church of Tayibat al-Imam in Syria (Figure 7.8). Another example is the bema mosaic in a church at Kiustendil (Bulgaria). Depicted in this mosaic is a kantharos from which a vine spreads and which is flanked by a pair of peacocks. Above it is the Hill of Golgotha as the source of the four rivers of Paradise, on top of which is a medallion containing the Greek letters alpha and omega. Below the kantharos appears a gate that is reminiscent of the church’s screen. The entire depiction is surrounded by twelve sheep, like the number of the apostles. This composition includes elements also seen in wall mosaics. Fruit trees laden with fruit, which appear on many of the church floors in order to denote that the church is the earthly Paradise or to express the idea that the entrance to Paradise passes through the church, were also depicted on wall mosaics, as were Nilotic landscapes and birds. This we learn from Choricius’ description of two of the churches of Gaza (in Palestine).27 Despite the distinctive features of each of the media and what was forbidden and allowed to be depicted on floors, we note a measure of commonality and mutual influence.
Figure 7.8  The central bema’s mosaic in the church of Tayibat al-Imam (in Syria). Courtesy of the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum in Jerusalem.
Notes


3 Ibid., 143–144.


Christian floor mosaics

21 Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History 10. 4. 21–22, 63–65.
22 Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History 10. 4. 2–3, 45–46.
23 Choricius, Laudatio Marciani, II, 52. See in Mango, Art of the Byzantine Empire, 72.
24 Mango, Art of the Byzantine Empire, 57.
27 Choricius, Laudatio Marciani I, 35; see Mango, Art of the Byzantine Empire, 63; idem, Laudatio Marciani II, 34, 69.

Further reading
Bowersock, Glen W. Mosaics as History; The Near East from Late Antiquity to Islam. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006.