

FIGURING TIME AND SPACE

THE ZODIAC IN THE SONS OF JACOB SYNAGOGUE | by carolos chaparro

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THE CONGREGATION SONS OF JACOB SYNAGOGUE IN Providence, Rhode Island was built in 1906 with the main sanctuary designed by Harry Marshak in 1922. As a two floored structure, the ground floor was built in 1906 and is where the *schul*, a smaller sanctuary used for daily minyan services, and kitchen are located. With the growth of the congregation came the availability of funding for the construction of a main sanctuary space on the top level of the building. The brick building stands at 24 Douglas Avenue on the eastern edge of Providence's Smith Hill. While the façade is not heavily ornamented, it is oriented toward the east, facing downtown Providence. The Congregation Sons of Jacob Synagogue has been listed on the National Register of Historic Places since 1989. This is the only synagogue left in the Smith Hill neighborhood and is still used for morning services and High Holy Day services. As is written in the continuation sheet of the synagogue's National Register of Historic Places form, this synagogue "is one of a multitude of neighborhood institutions which supported and sustained immigrants...left behind by their descendants as they...entered the American mainstream."¹ The Sons of Jacob Synagogue is standing evidence of the social, economic, cultural, and religious elements of the former thriving Jewry of Smith Hill. In 1946, the congregation consisted of over 300 members while only a handful remains today.² Because of the construction of Interstate Highway 95 near the front entrance to the

synagogue in the middle part of the twentieth century and the move of many Jewish families to the suburbs and East Side of Providence, the membership of the Sons of Jacob Synagogue has understandably diminished.

The sanctuary of this synagogue (fig. 1) contains a zodiac, a typically pagan image, painted on the ceiling. It is one of many murals found in the synagogue. Murals of four animals (deer, lion, eagle, and tiger) are seen on the western wall of the sanctuary along with two lions of Judah supporting the tablets of the commandments. The Sons of Jacob zodiac is a modern example of an ancient artistic tradition of the zodiac in Jewish synagogues. From 1923 to 1936 Sam Shore was the president of the congregation and is responsible for the zodiac; he painted the figures on the ceiling and oversaw all other decoration done in the synagogue. This zodiac surrounds a celestial scene of a cloudy sky and each figure is named in Hebrew and assigned a month in the Jewish calendar. For example, two zodiac symbols with human figures are Virgo and Sagittarius. As seen in the Sons of Jacob zodiac, Virgo (fig. 2) is assigned the month of Elul (אֱלוּל) and is identified in Hebrew as מזל בתולה, the sign of the virgin, while Sagittarius (fig. 3), the sign of the archer or מזל קשת, is assigned the month of Kislev (כֶּסֶלֶב).

The zodiac in this synagogue, as well as its historic appearance in late antique synagogues such as Beth Alpha, Sepphoris, and Hammt-Tiberias, raises a number of



fig. 1. SANCTUARY, CONGREGATION SONS OF JACOB SYNAGOGUE, PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND.
PHOTO BY CARLOS CHAPARRO, 2005.

questions. Since zodiac figures are pagan in origin, it is interesting to find them in the worship spaces of a tradition that forbids the making and worshipping of graven images from late antiquity into the modern era. Yet dozens of synagogues since antiquity portray the zodiac. In order to achieve an understanding of this relationship, the ceiling zodiac in the Congregation Sons of Jacob Synagogue must be placed in its historical contexts of both the pagan Greco-Roman tradition and synagogue zodiac art. This thesis examines the fusion of the pagan zodiac with Judaism as a crucial symbol of Jewish space and time in order to interpret the Sons of Jacob zodiac.

PAGAN SYMBOL

The zodiac has origins in seventh century BCE Babylonia;³ the name “zodiac” is derived from the Greek word *zōdiakos*, which means “of animals.”⁴ The astronomical base of the zodiac is “a circle of twelve constellations, each

of exactly thirty degrees extent, lying along the path of the sun, and by means of which the positions of the sun, moon and planets can be measured.”⁵ Twelve constellations, a ram, bull, twins, crab, lion, woman, scales, scorpion, archer, goat, waterman, and fish constitute the figures of the zodiac. Figural images such the Sumerian grain goddess Nidaba, a predecessor for Virgo, were the precursors of the images of the zodiac.⁶ Nidaba, as Virgo, is shown holding grain in her hand, associating her with the autumn harvest. This female figure is shown in association with the stars and the month of Elul. She is a constellation and a representation of the harvest. The zodiac was developed by the Sumerians as a calendar that depended on the positions of celestial bodies, constellations equivalent to the figures of the zodiac, in the night sky.⁷

The zodiac was utilized as both a method of charting time and a tool for divination by the Romans in the third century BCE.⁸ Ancient examples of the figural zodiac in circular formation include an Egyptian marble plate that



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fig. 2. *Virgo*, CONGREGATION SONS OF JACOB SYNAGOGUE, PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND.
PHOTO BY CARLOS CHAPARRO, 2005.

dates to the Greco-Roman period and includes the twelve figures of the zodiac with an hour circle. In the Gemma Augustaea, the emperor Augustus is crowned under the sign of Capricorn, his birth sign, in the year 27 BCE. Augustus further associated himself with his astrological sign in the coinage he issued.⁹ By associating himself with the heavenly bodies, Augustus made public his belief in astrology and justified the use of the zodiac as a tool for divination. Among the Roman populus, the zodiac was a charged symbol, especially after Helios became a central feature.¹⁰ To the Greco-Roman viewer, the divinely inspired zodiac was a figure of hope that the soul of the believer would rise up through the stars (the zodiac figures) and join the divine (deity in the center).¹¹ A relationship between the divine and the human is established by this interpretation. The pagan zodiac was not merely a calendar, but was a reminder of the Greco-Roman divine. The viewer of this charged symbol was meant to realize the centrality of the divine world to the human world.

JEWISH SYMBOL

The zodiac was incorporated into Judaism in late antiquity. The Jewish zodiac, which sometimes has the



fig. 3. *Sagittarius*, CONGREGATION SONS OF JACOB SYNAGOGUE, PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND.
PHOTO BY CARLOS CHAPARRO, 2005.

pagan deity Helios in the center, is found in late antique synagogues despite the Second Commandment that forbids Jews from making and worshipping "graven images." The problematic relationship among the zodiac, Jewish sacred space, the Biblical prohibition, and Helios as central image is complicated, as the archaeological excavation of several synagogues in the Near East suggests.

The 1932 excavation of the second-century CE Dura Europos synagogue revealed to scholars a wealth of figurative images on the walls of the space. Paintings of Biblical scenes are found on the Torah niche in addition to panels on the walls.¹² The images in this synagogue are the result of a liberal interpretation of Exodus 20:4, which is the passage in Scripture that forbids the making of graven images. The rabbinical interpretation allowed for the depiction of sacred scenes in synagogues.¹³ Due to the fact that these synagogues were part of the Roman Empire, it is a fact that Jewish communities existed alongside pagan communities; this is true especially at Dura Europos. Therefore, a liberal interpretation that would allow for figural art in synagogues could be a result of the close association between Jews and Gentiles in the Empire¹⁴. Scholarly research of the Talmud confirms that at least in the Fourth Century CE, the rabbis "permitted mosaics

to be used on synagogue floors."¹⁵ Thus, the Second Commandment was not interpreted in late antiquity as a prohibition against the human figure in synagogue art.

Archaeological excavations in the Near East have uncovered figural images from late antique synagogues, including floor mosaics of the zodiac. Scholars have researched the iconography of these images and have offered interpretations about what the zodiac means when it is found in a Jewish context and what it meant to the Jewish congregations who worshiped in these spaces. What is controversial about the zodiac floor mosaics is the classical Greco-Roman divine iconography, namely the depiction of Helios. In order to understand the seemingly problematic depiction of Helios in the center of the zodiac, it is important to examine the adoption of the zodiac as a whole into Jewish sacred space.

The Beth Alpha synagogue of the Byzantine sixth century features a zodiac floor mosaic in between mosaics of the scene of the Aqedah, or binding of Isaac, and the Torah ark surrounded by candelabra and lions. These two scenes are typical Jewish scenes, as the Aqedah illustrates the interaction between the father of the Jewish people and the Divine while the Torah ark is the place where the Hebrew Scriptures are stored. The candelabra recall imagery from the Temple in Jerusalem that was destroyed in the year 70 CE while the lions serve as a classic motif in Jewish art and identity. Four figures representing the four seasons of the year surround the twelve zodiac figures. The seasons, however, do not correlate with the astral figures of the twelve Hebrew months, which indicates a disregard for the astrological significance of the Greco-Roman zodiac.¹⁶ Historian of Jewish art, Rachel Hachlili notes that the "zodiac was adapted from pagan art to represent the yearly cylindrical cycle"¹⁷ due to the fact that some examples of zodiac mosaics from the fourth through sixth centuries in Israel contain Hebrew month labels for each of the twelve figures.¹⁸

The Jewish disregard for the maintenance of the astrological significance of the Greco-Roman zodiac and the emphasis on providing figures for the twelve Jewish months creates a new meaning for the zodiac. This transformation converts the Greco-Roman astral symbol into a symbol of Jewish time. When the zodiac is displaced from its previous context as a Greco-Roman symbol for

divination and emplaced into its new context as a symbol of Jewish time, the meaning of the zodiac has changed. Studies in ritual theory have shown that the meaning of a symbol is dependent on its context, where it is placed.¹⁹ In this light, the zodiac is seen as a Jewish symbol of time due to its proximity to other Jewish symbols in a Jewish space and the incorporation of the figures of the zodiac into the Jewish calendar.

In interpreting the classical Greco-Roman divine imagery of the Jewish zodiac, two leading scholars in the field present information crucial to understanding the zodiac in its Jewish context. Joseph Gutmann recognizes the differing interpretations among scholars about who Helios is supposed to represent. He notes that scholarly debate has suggested Helios as God or Elijah.²⁰ Rachel Hachlili, however, identifies Helios as the sun, the day, which stresses the importance of the zodiac as an image of Jewish time.²¹

The zodiac floor mosaic in the Sepphoris synagogue of the Byzantine era in the Galilee supports the idea of the zodiac as a symbol of Jewish time. The twelve signs are assigned certain months of the Jewish year while the four seasons are depicted in the four corners of the composition in which the zodiac wheel is the central focus. Here, however, a shining sun replaces the Helios figure. In addition to the assignment of a month to each figure, an inscription is written on each figure that identifies in Hebrew the name of the figure.²²

As it is found in Jewish worship spaces, it seems as if the zodiac has more meaning than just a figural calendar of the Jewish months. Helios is a Roman divinity and he is found in Jewish synagogues and can be understood as a figural representation of the sun. This understanding of the zodiac seems to be lacking as the Jewish zodiac is found in ancient worship sites. The synagogue is traditionally viewed as the House of Prayer, Study, and most importantly, God. The placement of the zodiac within a synagogue among mosaics of sacred scenes and sacred objects indicates a sacred aspect to the Jewish zodiac.

The zodiac, according to Joseph Gutmann, is an aid in recognizing God's *shekhina*, or divine presence on Earth. In order to stress the idea of the *shekhina* within the zodiac in the form of Helios, Gutmann quotes Midrash Devarim Rabbah by stating:

The Holy One Blessed-Be-He showed Abraham all of the zodiac (mazalot) surrounding his *shekhina* (Divine Presence); ... and said: just as the zodiac surrounds Me, with My glory in the center, so shall your descendants multiply and camp under many flags, with my *shekhina* in the center.²³

Gutmann recognizes an elevated status of the zodiac as an instrument of Jewish prayer. In its Jewish context, the zodiac is filled with the presence of the Divine as it was in the Greco-Roman tradition. With the *shekhina* placed within the zodiac, it becomes a religiously charged Jewish symbol. Although the zodiac is not worshipped in and of itself, Gutmann suggests that it is a visual representation of God's presence on Earth.

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With the zodiac as an instrument of Jewish prayer, it is appropriate to find this image within the House of Prayer. The zodiac, as a reminder of the *shekhina*, is then made into a powerful symbol within Jewish sacred space. Representation of Jewish time and the establishment of intense sacredness are two key factors in the Jewish zodiac. Hachlili has helped to establish the astral figures of the zodiac as representations of time while Gutmann has established the representation of God's presence on earth. When these two ideas are melded together, the zodiac is seen as a figure of both calendrical time and sacred space. As a symbol of time infused with the *shekhina*, the zodiac indicates God's centrality to the continuation of time. The zodiac itself is not considered sacred, but indexes and serves as a referent of the most sacred.

In the Congregation Sons of Jacob Synagogue, instead of a tight circle around Helios, the zodiac figures surround a cloud filled sky and line the ceiling of the sanctuary. The empty sky may represent the Biblical notion of the impossibility of representing the Divine. As in the Sepphoris zodiac, there is no Helios figure in the center of this zodiac, but a celestial scene. The big sky painted on this ceiling, as a referent to the invisibility of God, is large and suggests the immensity of the Divine. Birds fly in the scene as if reveling in wonder of creation or rejoicing in God's *shekhina*. The Sons of Jacob zodiac is a work of art that encompasses the sanctuary and, in effect, the congregation. When in the sanctuary, the person is surrounded by the twelve months

and is in the presence of the Divine, when the zodiac is interpreted as a representation of the *shekhina*.

Although the zodiac in this sanctuary is stunning, it is not the only twentieth century American example of this Jewish feature. Other congregations have incorporated the zodiac into their worship sites, such as Temple Mount Sinai in El Paso, Texas. The zodiac in this synagogue is different from the Sons of Jacob zodiac in that the figures are arranged linearly on a wall in the hall adjacent to the chapel. Furthermore, these modern examples cannot be understood as a revival of an ancient tradition. Instead, they are part of a continuous tradition that started in antiquity and continued through the medieval period and into our contemporary time. One notable example of this is the ceiling zodiac of the synagogue at Chodorow. The painting of this zodiac is attributed to Mordechai Lisnicki of Jaryczow. Interestingly, this is the oldest known wooden synagogue, with a date of 1642.²⁴

The Sons of Jacob zodiac is a recent example of the complex historical tradition of figuring time and sacred space in Judaism. As a recent work of art, this zodiac provides a visual record of how an ancient tradition has continued to be influential throughout history. As a part of the Sons of Jacob Synagogue, the ceiling zodiac also gives testament to the Jewish community in the city of Providence. Thus, the Congregation Sons of Jacob Synagogue shares in the tradition of a recent religious community and in the ancient tradition of Jewish prayer.

Endnotes

- ¹ National Register of Historic Places, Section 8, Page 8.8.
- ² Taken from the 97th Anniversary Celebration of the Congregation Sons of Jacob Synagogue Program, Oct. 17, 1993.
- ³ James Evans, *The History and Practice of Ancient Astronomy* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 57.
- ⁴ Rupert Gleadow, *The Origin of the Zodiac* (New York: Atheneum, 1969), 15.
- ⁵ Gleadow, 16.
- ⁶ Gleadow, 171.
- ⁷ Gleadow, 23.
- ⁸ Gleadow, 65.
- ⁹ Gleadow, 64.
- ¹⁰ Erwin R. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period*, Abridged Edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 134-138.
- ¹¹ Goodenough, 134.
- ¹² Joseph Gutmann, "Early Synagogue and Jewish Catacomb Art and its Relation to Christian Art," *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, Part 2, Vol. 21.2, 1984, 1314.
- ¹³ M. Rostovtzeff, *Dura-Europos and its Art* (New York: AMS Press, 1978), 102.
- ¹⁴ Lee I. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), 588.
- ¹⁵ Hershel Shanks, *Judaism in Stone: The Archaeology of Ancient Synagogues* (Tel Aviv: Steimatzky's Agency, 1979), 146.
- ¹⁶ Goodenough, 117.
- ¹⁷ Rachel Hachlili, "Synagogues in the Land of Israel: The Art and Architecture of Late Antique Synagogues" in *Sacred Realm: The Emergence of the Synagogue in the Ancient World*, Steven Fine, ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 124.
- ¹⁸ Hachlili, 124.
- ¹⁹ Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1982), 55.
- ²⁰ Gutmann, 1337.
- ²¹ Hachlili, 124.
- ²² Ze'ev Weiss and Ehud Netzer, *Promise and Redemption: A Synagogue Mosaic from Sepphoris* (Jerusalem: Israel Museum, 1996), 26.
- ²³ Gutmann, 1337.
- ²⁴ H.A. Meek, *The Synagogue* (London: Phaidon Press, 1995), 150.