

## The Lost Temples of Maximinus Daia

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Last updated: September 2013

### Summary

In his *Ecclesiastical History* and *Martyrs of Palestine*, Eusebius of Caesera, c. 263-339, wrote about a massive spree of temple building during the reign of the Roman Emperor Maximinus Daia (305-313 C.E.). The construction of those temples took place while Eusebius was alive, and there could be little doubt that he wrote about events that indeed occurred. Temples do not disappear, nevertheless, if we examine archaeological studies of that era, no traces of them were ever found. I suggest that the remains of those temples still exist and they can be identified, among other characteristics, by a peculiar feature – their orientations. With their mastery of engineering skills, the Romans built the temples in such a way that each of them oriented, with utmost accuracy, toward another temple or a central point. I argue that nowadays, many of those temples are identified as ancient Jewish or Samaritans synagogues or possibly also ancient churches. I propose that several early Christian sects bluffed the Romans and used the opportunity of this spree of building to construct edifices for their own purposes. Some of these structures may have been served later as synagogues or churches, or prayer site for various sects.

There is a controversy concerning the dating of ancient edifices generally known as ancient synagogue. For this reason, and also to show a pattern, I include structures that were apparently built in different eras than the beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> century.

### 1. Introduction

In his *Ecclesiastical History* (Book VIII, chapter 1:8), Eusebius of Caesarea gives testimony of the erection of temples at the beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> century during the great persecution of Christians instigated by the Emperor Maximinus Daia:

Accordingly, he applied himself to the persecution against us with more energy and persistence than those before him, ordering temples to be erected in every city and the sacred groves that had been destroyed through long lapse of time to be restored with all diligence.

In his *Martyrs of Palestine*, (chapter ix) Eusebius wrote:

But by some new impulse, I know not what, he who held the power to persecute was again aroused against the Christians. Immediately letters from Maximinus against us were published everywhere in every province. The governors and the military prefect urged by edicts and letters and public ordinances the magistrates and generals and notaries in all the cities to carry out the imperial decree, which ordered that the altars of the idols should with all speed be rebuilt;<sup>1</sup>

In the Land of Israel there are numerous edifices from the early centuries of the C.E. which are defined as ancient synagogues. On the identification of those sites as Jewish synagogues Robinson et al. (1852: 71) wrote:

The size, the elaborate sculptured ornament, and the splendour of these edifices, do not belong to a scattered and down-trodden people; such as the Jews have been in these regions ever since the fourth century. These costly synagogues, therefore, can be referred only to the earlier centuries of the Christian era; when Galilee was the chief seat of the Jews; and Jewish learning and schools flourished at Tiberias. All these circumstances would seem to mark a condition of prosperity and wealth and influence among the Jews of Galilee in that age of which neither their own historians, nor any other, have given us any account.

I suggest that the remains of many of these so-called ancient synagogues were actually the temples ordered to be built by Maximinus. I propose that they can be identified, among other characteristics, by a peculiar feature – their orientations.

The first clue for my assertion is a piece of information written by the Israeli archaeologist Eliezer Sukenik (1889-1953). In his book concerning the so-called ancient synagogue at Beth Alpha, he wrote (1932: 11):

Like most of the synagogues north of Jerusalem and west of the Jordan, the building is oriented in an approximately southerly direction. A divergence to the west from this general direction (27 degrees S.W. by compass), which is actually justified in that Jerusalem is S.W. of Beth Alpha, is most probably accidental and due perhaps to the lie of the terrain.

Being curious to know where 27 degrees S.W. (minus 2 degrees due to compass deviation) leads, I used a protractor and a 1:400000 map of Israel to discover that the line runs directly to Mount Gerizim. Obviously, the Beth Alpha building could not have been a Jewish synagogue; by the archaeologists' own definition it must have been a Samaritan one. However, it could not have been that either; the building is decorated with figures of human beings, something the Samaritans would never have done since they observe the Second Commandment strictly.

Realizing that an important clue to the nature of ancient structures may be revealed through their orientation, I continued my investigation with the help of the *Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavation in the Holy Land (EAEHL)*(1975, 1993) and other published sources, material from the excavation files at the archives of the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA Archives) in Jerusalem, Google Earth, maps of 1:50000 and 1:400000 scale, a protractor and a ruler.

Even in antiquity the nature of these building was not clear to the casual observer. Lee I. Levine (NEAEHL s.v. synagogues, p. 1423) writes:

The synagogue adopted many of the prevalent artistic forms of ornamentation of the time...The designs in many mosaic floors were drawn from Byzantine models found in churches, palaces, and villas...A similar influence can be detected in the synagogue façade wall - particularly of the Galilean-type synagogue. Such buildings are indistinguishable from contemporary pagan edifices, as their decorations and plans are identical...One rabbinic source (B.T., *Shab.* 72b) tells of a man who walked along the street and bowed down before a building, thinking it was a synagogue. Only afterward did he realize that the building was, in fact, a pagan temple.

Maximinus' scheme did not work and it is possible that even he himself understood that it failed. Eusebius wrote:

In truth he carried his drunken excesses to such a point that he became mad and deranged in his cups, and when drunk would give such orders as he would repent of next day when he was sober. (*Ecclesiastical History*, VIII 14: 11)

## **2. Comments on identification, dating, and orientations of the so-called Ancient Synagogues**

There is no a continuous tradition that identifies those structures that are now defined as ancient synagogues as Jewish prayer sites starting from the era in which they were built. There are many testimonies left by medieval Jewish explorers who described the impressive remains of the synagogues that they had noticed among the ruined ancient sites. The systematic search and identification of those structures began with by E. Robinson in 1852 and E. Renan in 1861. The research was intensified by the members of the British Palestine Exploration Fund, for example Sir Charles William Wilson, captain Claude Reignier Conder (sometimes written Condor), and Captain Charles Warren, who conducted the first archaeological examinations. The French Victor Guerin had also been studying those structures at the same time as the English team, however he marked many of those structures as churches. During the 1880s Laurence Oliphant and G. Schumacher claimed to discovered ancient synagogues or parts of them.

Ernest Renan (1823-1892) was a French orientalist who headed a scientific exploration team sent to Syria by Napoleon III in 1860. Victor Guerin (1821-1891) was a French scholar who visited the Land of Israel 8 times between 1852 and 1888 and wrote extensively about his findings. His writings are considered to be of very high value and they were translated into Hebrew.

Laurence Oliphant (1829-1888) was a British author, journalist, diplomat, businessman, and mystic. A generation before Herzl he came up with the idea of settling Jews in the Holy Land, an act to be based on an agreement with the Ottoman authorities. Moses Lilenblum of Odessa, one of the forerunners of Zionism, could say of Oliphant that Jews hoped he would be the Messiah of Israel (Taylor 1982: 190). During the latter part of his life Oliphant employed as his secretary Naftali Herz Imber – the author of the Hatikva lyrics.

In 1879 Oliphant embarked on a journey to Palestine to search for sites for settling Jews. Before leaving he had had conversations with Conder and Warren, officers of the Palestine Exploration Fund who had surveyed the area in the preceding five years. In a 259-page, very interesting biography of Oliphant (Taylor 1982), this is all the information I could retrieve concerning Oliphant's preparations to identify and study ancient synagogues.

Gottlieb Schumacher (1857-1925) was born in Zanesville, Ohio, where his father was a member of the Tempelgesellschaft ('Temple Society), a Swabian protestant sect that had emigrated from Tuebingen. When the leaders of the group began to carry out their plan to colonize Palestine in the

late 1860's, the Schumacher family settled in Haifa. Following the completion of his studies Schumacher became a leading figure in the construction of roads and houses in the Land of Israel. In the course of this work he produced the first accurate maps of certain regions, along with detailed descriptions of the archaeological remains and the contemporary villages. Later he conducted several archaeological excavations in Megiddo.

The synagogue at ed-Dikkeh was discovered by Oliphant. Here is a section of his description (1887 [2005]: 235):

I found myself in the presence of a building the character of which I had yet to determine, the walls of which were still standing to a height of eight feet. The area they enclosed was thickly strewn with building-stones, fragments of columns, pedestals, capitals, and cornices. Two at least of the columns were *in situ*, while the bases of others were too much concealed by piles of stone to enable me to determine their original positions. My first impression, from the character of the architecture which was strewn about, was that this was formerly a Roman temple; but a further and more careful examination convinced me that it had originally been a Jewish synagogue, which at a later period had been converted to another use; probably it had been appropriated by the Byzantines as a basilica, or Christian church. This was the more probable, as the existing walls had evidently been built upon the foundations of a former structure. The massive stones were set in mortar, which is not the case with the synagogues hitherto discovered; and I should doubtless have been completely at fault in classing this building had my attention not been already directed to the remains of the synagogues brought to light recently by the exertions of the Palestine Exploration Fund.

On the remains at ed-Dikkeh, Schumacher (1886: 245) wrote:

... while from the midst of them rose the walls of what appears to me to have been a synagogue. Owing, however, to a later superstructure having evidently been reared upon the original foundation, I feel somewhat diffident in pronouncing decidedly upon this point. I will, however, state my reasons for coming to this conclusion, while the accompanying sketches of the ornamentation I found here, may enable others, more competent to form an opinion than myself, to judge of their origin.

The drawing of the foundation, which appears on page 246 of Schumacher's book, is according to

the list of illustration, a “plan of ruins, supposed to be a synagogue, at ed Dikkeh.” According to Kohl and Watzinger (1916: 2) Schumacher thought there were definitely reasons to remove the ruins at ed-Dikkeh from the list of Jewish synagogues.

Oliphant and Schumacher were neighbors in the Templars' colony in Haifa, and they co-operated in an initiative to construct a railway line linking Turkey, Egypt and Syria (Taylor 1982: 215, 226). Oliphant bought land along the proposed railway line, apparently in anticipation of profits. Later his second wife sold this land (Taylor 1982: 255)

Determining the dates when those edifices were built is a difficult undertaking. On the methods of dating ancient buildings E. Meyers wrote (1987: 130):

It is our contention that the only certain way of dating any ancient building is through scientific excavation and scholarly evaluation of data that emanate from such excavation.

I suggest that if the result of “scientific excavation and scholarly evaluation of data” and not just from following general flexible categories of synagogue buildings, it turns out that a building is from the beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, then it should be examine whether the edifice was indeed a Jewish or Samaritan synagogue, or a Roman temple.

Discussing the limits of archaeology Meyers & Strange (1981: 29) stress that archaeology can and does often contradict the written text, or to be in conflict with it. One example is that synagogues not always were built on the highest spots as the Tosepta (*Megilla* 4.23) indicates, or the principle of sacred orientation towards Jerusalem (Dan. 6:10; Tos. *Megilla* 4.22; b. *Berakot* 30 *a* and Josephus *Against Apion* 2.10) was not always followed. I suggest the possibility that the Jews of ancient time followed, as expected, the tradition that was already established, and built nondescript synagogues oriented towards Jerusalem on the highest spots. Modern explorers and contemporary archaeologists could simply be wrong.

The fact that a building includes Jewish symbols does not necessarily mean that the building is a Jewish synagogue; it could be a church, nowadays and also in antiquity. Figure 2.1 presents the interior of a 19<sup>th</sup> century wooden church in the town of Rääkkylä in eastern Finland. On the right side, above, there is a depiction of a *menora*.



Figure 2.1. The church at Rääkkylä, Finland.

Christianity evolved from Judaism and it is just natural that, in addition of using the Hebrew Bible, Christians have always used Jewish motifs. In fact, the appearances of Jewish symbols in a building may indicate that the place was not at all a Jewish place. Safrai (2003: 247) wrote that “the halakha forbids the crafting of a *menora* similar to that in the temple, and recommended the fashioning of *menorot* with five, six, or eight branches.” bagatti (1971: 114) wrote that “the *Apocalypse* speaks of the 'seven candelabra' of lamps and the golden censers which burn perfumes symbolizing the prayers of the saints. These objects, already in use in the Temple (*Luke* 1, 9), appeared to be used also by the first Christians for their nocturnal assemblies.”

Determining the orientations of these edifices is not that simple task of just studying the drawings that appear in archaeological literature. For example, in Meyers et al. (1981) there are two different drawings of the site at Meiron which give the edifice two different orientations: one directly south (p. 15), the same orientation given by Kohl and Watzinger (1916: Tafel XI), and one orienting slightly southeast (p.4). In the beginning of March 2011 I visited the site. Checking the orientation with a compass it seems that the correct orientation is on page 4, that is, slightly southeast.

The site at Isfiya also produced two different orientations. The excavators (Avi-Yonah and Makhouly 1933: 119) prepared a drawing with an orientation of 66 degrees from the north (Figure 2.2) while the *EAEHL* (s.v. Husifah) gives an orientation of 111 degrees (Figure 2.3).

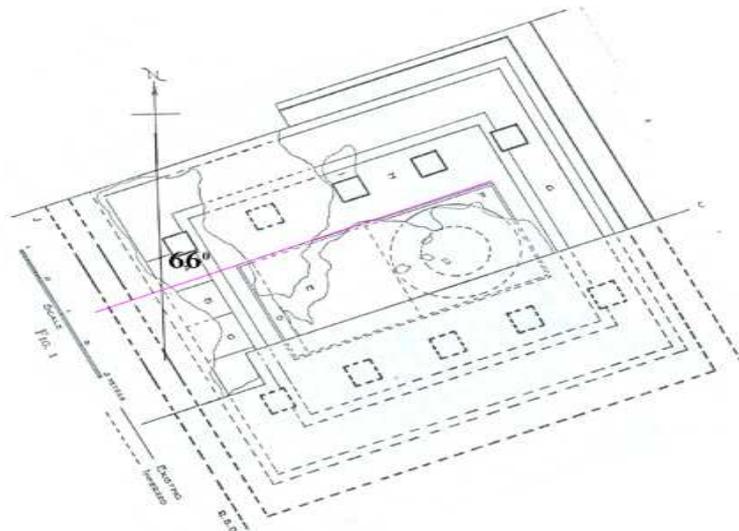


Figure 2.2. The orientation Isfiya according to Avi-Yonah and Makhouly (1933)

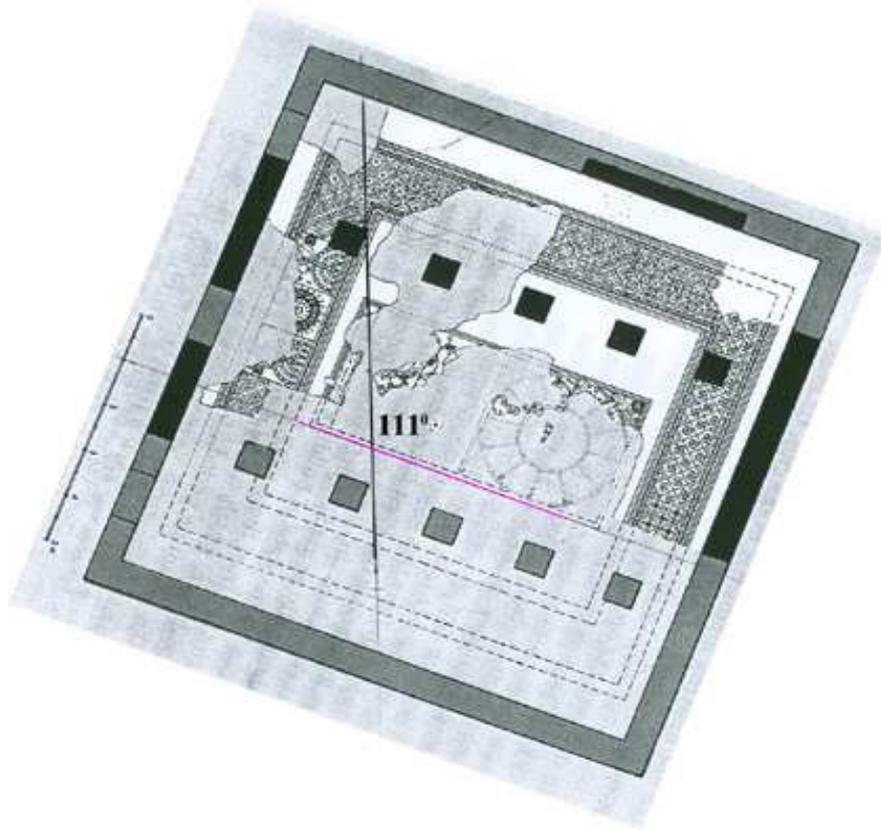


Figure 2.3. The orientation of Husifah according to *NEAEHL*

One site that might have been associated with the system is the ancient monastery at Beth Hashitta. Examining the published drawing it seems to have been oriented towards the edifice at Beth Alpha. However, while browsing at the homepage of kibbutz Beth Hashitta, it has turned out that the mosaic at the site was removed and the remains of the structure dug out, as they were in the way of the enlargement of the local basalt quarry.

I am holding in my hand *Bulletin I* published in 1949 by the Hebrew University / Jerusalem and the Museum of Jewish Antiquity. It was written by E. L. Sukenik. The first 23 pages are devoted to describing the present state of ancient synagogue studies and pages 25-30 tell about the Samaritan synagogue at Salbit (preliminary report). Salbit is known nowadays as Shaalbim. At the end of this small publication there are 16 pages of pictures. The reason I have been so much interested in this booklet is because nowhere I could find a drawing of the site at Shaalbim. Unfortunately, such a drawing does not appear in this publication either. All what the archaeologist had to say about the orientation was that “the building is oriented towards the north-east, in the direction of Mount Gerizim, the holy place of the Samaritans” (p. 29). From Shaalbim one cannot see Mount Gerizim, so if the direction was exactly towards Mount Gerizim, then the builders must have used the services of surveyors.

I have been wondering why Sukenik did not include a drawing of the site in this publication; in his book concerning the excavation at Beth Alpha there is a fine drawing of the site. I find it hard to believe that while checking the orientation of the edifice at Beth Alpha, he had not noticed it was

directed towards Mount Gerizim. At that time he explained it as “a divergence to the west from this general direction (27 degrees S.W. by compass), which is actually justified in that Jerusalem is S.W. of Beth Alpha, is most probably accidental and due perhaps to the lie of the terrain.” However, Salbit was a different case and if indeed the orientation towards Mount Gerizim was very accurate, then until a good explanation for this phenomenon could be found, I suggest the course of action chosen was withholding some information, hence no drawing of the site.

According to Ilan (1991: 252) not much was left of the site at Shaalbim when he visited the place in 1987. So, instead of starting to dig again there, I will just wait. According to a press release by the Israel antiquities Authorities, in August 2010 a Samaritan synagogue, c. 1,500 years old, was discovered southwest of Bet She’an:

[http://www.antiquities.org.il/article\\_Item\\_eng.asp?sec\\_id=25&subj\\_id=240&id=1725&module\\_id=#as](http://www.antiquities.org.il/article_Item_eng.asp?sec_id=25&subj_id=240&id=1725&module_id=#as)).

I am looking forwards to the publication of a drawing of the site. As far as I can imagine, Mount Gerizim cannot be observed from Beth Shean, so if the azimuth is exactly to Mount Gerizim, then the builders must have used surveyors.

The Romans were able to draw straight lines between two points which were dozens of kilometers apart. One such example is the 90-kilometer long Roman road, known presently as the Stane Street, that linked London to Chichester. The road was apparently constructed in the 1<sup>st</sup> century C.E. For the first 20 kilometers from the south end of the Roman London Bridge the road aims exactly at the east gate of Chichester. There are no records as to how the Romans had accomplished such a task, and in his study of surveying instruments of Greece and Rome, Lewis (2001: 238-242) endeavors to demonstrate how they could have done it.

It also seems that the Romans practiced orienting buildings towards other buildings. See Hannah and Magli (2011).

While checking the orientation of these edifices, one must take into account that the structured examined are ancient buildings and that the original walls or other determining factors might have been blurred during the centuries; a mistake of half a degree in my measurements results in a diversion of half a kilometer over 30 kilometers ( $(30 \times 2 \times 3.14)/360$ ).

### 3. Edifices in Eastern Galilee that Oriented Southeast

One would expect synagogue in eastern Galilee to orient slightly southwest or south towards Jerusalem, however several of them oriented southeast, either towards sites in the Beth Shean Valley or possibly towards sites across the Jordan River.

One of them is the massive structure at Meiron. Being one of the longest among ancient synagogues, it is 27.5m long and an interior width of 13.6 along the northern short wall (E. Meyers et al. 1981: 9), it could have accommodated many hundreds worshipers. According to the excavators the building belongs to the period 250-360 C.E. and work on it must have gone on for decades (p. xix). There is no tradition that associates this site to any known Jewish settlement. In fact, it is not certain the place is indeed the same Meiron mentioned in ancient writings.

Figure 3.1 shows the orientation of the building (Meron, Erik Meyers, G-12/1977)



Figure 3.1. The orientation of edifice at Meiron (Meron, Erik Meyers, G-12/1977)

Examining the orientation, it seems that the structure was directed towards a site at the Beth Shean Valley or a site across the Jordan River (Figure 3.2). Meyers & Strange (1981: 144) wrote that “the principle of sacred orientation may be observed in the basilical structure found in the American excavations at ancient Meiron, where the triple facade faces south towards Jerusalem.” However,

the building oriented slightly southeast, not to the direction of Jerusalem. I assume that the people who built the edifice at Meiron knew exactly where the south was but had had another direction on mind. Moreover, I suggest that had they intended to orient the building south, they probably would have saved carving less of the stony slope.



Figure 3.2. The orientation of the edifice at Meiron

While hundreds of thousands of people visit the grave of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai just few hundreds meters south of the edifice, very few bother to climb the hill and visit the so-called ancient synagogue. Touring the site at the beginning of March 2011, the wall hewed in the rock was covered by graffiti (Figure 3.3) smeared by a bunch of vandals and, even worse, om-ho'oretzes. Apparently nobody noticed or cared, which somehow indicates that the place is far from being considered to be a holy place. One cannot imagine such defiling around the holy tomb of Bar Yochai.



Figure 3.3. Graffiti at Meiron, March 2011

The site is situated on one of the eastern spurs of Mt. Meiron (191/265) (Meyers C. et al. 1974: 2). Meyers E. et al. (1975: 84) wrote:

From the evidence of the 1975 season it is now clear that the synagogue was built in Stratum IV, probably about the year 300 C.E. This is the first stratum to yield data for massive structure with pottery and coins in a clear, stratified context associated with the building of the synagogue.

On the style of the building, Meyers, E. et al. (1981: 155) wrote:

Roman basilical plan and triple facade, it is second only to Beth She'arim in its conformity to Roman building patterns and standard Roman measures.

For many centuries Meiron has been a place of Jewish pilgrimage, as several celebrated scholars and holy man are believed to be buried their. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century several known explorers visited the place, took notes for their reports, and continued their traveling. On of them was Robinson, who visited the place with his companions on April 14, 1852 (Robinson et al. 1856: 71-75). Another was Wilson who remarked (1869: 37):

In choosing sites for the synagogues in the different towns, the builders have by no means selected the most prominent positions. That at Nebartim lies below the old town, at Meiron a site has been excavated in the rocky side of the hill, and in Irbid (Arbel) the building is awkwardly situated in the lower part of the town, some distance down the northern slope of the hill, which has been partly cut away for it. (Comment added.)

Figure 3.4 is a drawing of the excavation (Meron, Erik Meyers, G-12/1977)

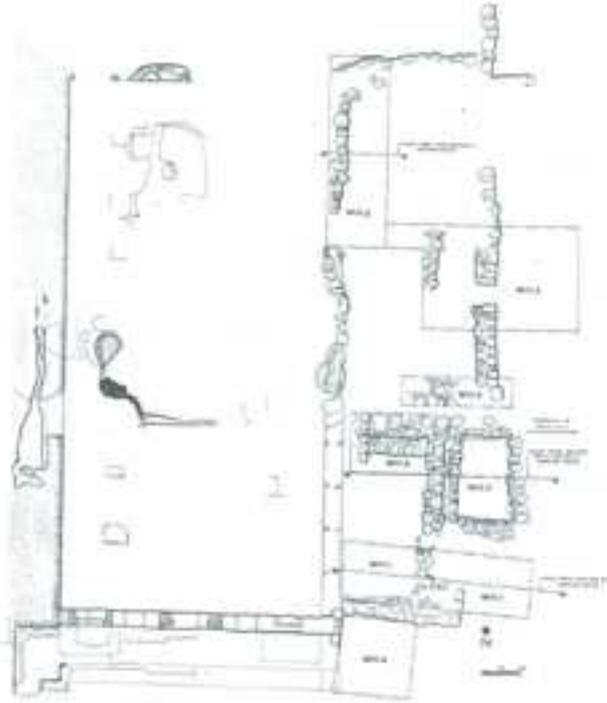


Figure 3.4. The Site at Meiron (Meron, Erik Meyers, G-12/1977)

In this drawing the building orients directly southwards, but the drawing is incorrect.

In the text below the drawing the authors wrote (Meyers et al. 1981: 15):

Note plastered bedrock niche in western wall and so-called *plastered* pool and other bedrock crevices and channels in the synagogue floor.

Kohl & Watzinger, who apparently were the first to excavate the site, gave the measurements of the hollow as approximately 1,50m in width and a depth of 1.35m (1916: 84). They wrote that at the edge of the rock there was a channel that collected rain water and conducted it into the hollow. In their opinion the hollow and the channel were constructed in a later period than the building itself.

According to Meyers E. et al. (1981: 6) the plastered cave, plastered water-way, and plastered pool all testify to a medieval water-rite there. They wrote:

The pool appears to have one low step up to the west which ascended to a column base, which strongly implies that the columns were not there when the pool was in use. Furthermore the

pool is not centered, which presumably would be the case if the columns were standing when it was built.

Still on this matter they wrote (p. 18):

It is impossible to determine the ethnic identity of the people who lived here in Stratum VII. One can theorize that they were Jewish since they did not build *within* the synagogue and because the pool and plastered cave inside the otherwise abandoned synagogue seem to have been in use at this time. Consequently it is an attractive possibility that a Jewish family lived here in the medieval period and provided pilgrims with some kind of lustrations within the ruins of a once-imposing synagogue.

In 1978 Meyers E. and Meyers C. wrote that “The floor of the sanctuary is bare down to rock; unfortunately, there is nothing for present-day archaeologists to dig.” Figure 3.5 presents the author of this article standing on top the earth-filled cavity. While other major ancient synagogues are well kept, this one seems to be quite abandoned.



Figure 3.5. The author of this article standing on top of the earth-filled plastered cavity

In my opinion, the idea of a pool in the middle of a synagogue sounds absurd. I suggest that a more logical explanation would be that this was a baptizing pool in a midst of a church. There is a plastered cavity also in the floor of the so-called ancient synagogue at Beth Alpha. The explanations offered there for the existence of the cavity are the synagogue treasure – as coins were found inside – or a *geniza*. I suggest that the cavity there was also a baptizing pool. However, while in Beth Alpha the cavity was covered with stones apparently to hide it, the pool at Meiron was bigger and apparently uncovered. I suggest that it was constructed in the floor after Christianity was legitimized.

Meyers et al. Wrote (1981):

Our task has been somewhat eased by the fact no excavation had preceded ours, though the German team of Kohl and Watzinger has surely made matters more difficult in the synagogue area as consequence of their survey...The ruins of the Meiron synagogue have attracted the

attention of medieval travelers and pilgrims as well as modern explorer since the time of C.W. Wilson, who first cleared remains from the building in 1868. Further clearance and survey were conducted by the German team of H. Kohl and C. Watzinger. One can see from comparing recent photograph with older pictures that many of the architectural fragments collected in and around the synagogue were moved there in recent times, or at least subsequent to the German survey of 1905-1907. Discussions with local inhabitants have borne this out. Further, many of those fragments were moved to the terrace on which the synagogue is built during the restoration of the eastern portal by the Israel Department of Antiquities in the 1950's.

Indeed, examining photos 167 and 168 in Kohl and Watzinger's book reveals that the floor of the edifice was clear (See Figure 3.6.)

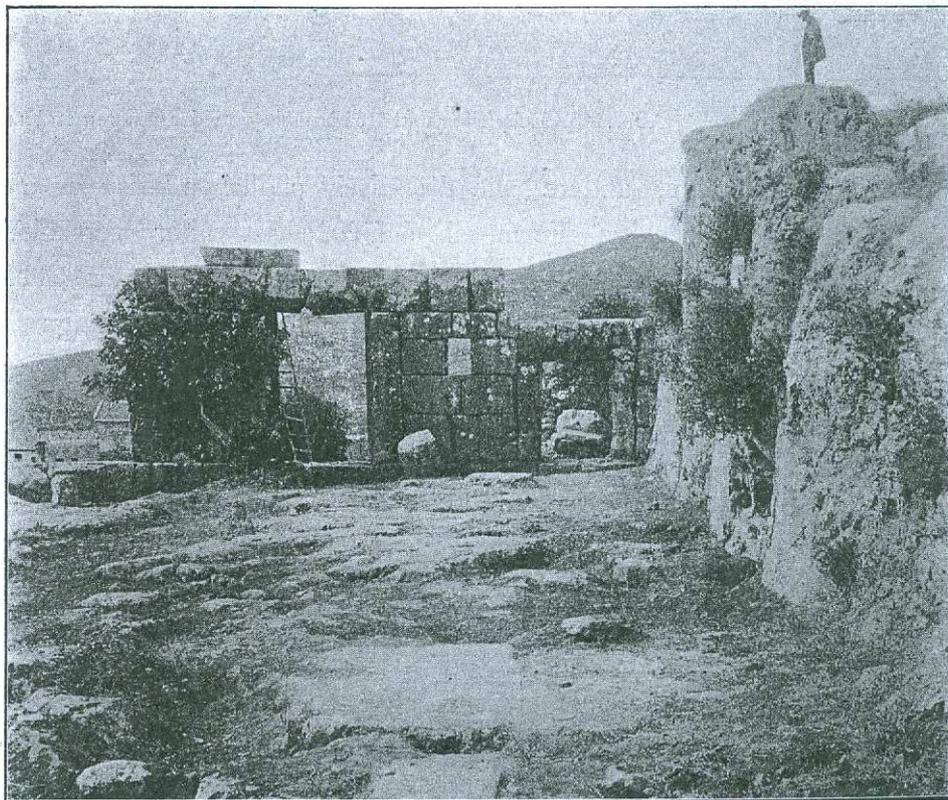


Abb. 168. Inneres der Ruine mit den Standplätzen der Säulen.

Figure 3.6. Abb. 168 from Kohl and Watzinger's book

The fact that many of the architectural fragments were scattered just outside the edifice may indicate that the structure was intentionally destroyed. Oliphant wrote (1886 [2005]: 75) that “pieces of columns are lying about, with pedestals and capitals, but many of the finest fragments

have rolled down the eastern slope.” I raised the possibility that the Roman destroyed the building after they realized it was used for other purposes than intended. In other so-called ancient synagogues, like for example En Gedi, there are signs of deliberate destruction.

It is not clear why “the German team of Kohl and Watzinger has surely made matter more difficult in the synagogue area.” As for the moving of the fragments into the edifice floor in the 1950's, one can only guess that the idea behind such undertaking was to collect the fragments into one spot so that later on a team of archaeologists would endeavor to restore the building to its former glory, or at least rebuild some of the columns, as it is sometimes done.

The edifice at Bar'am also oriented southeast towards a site in the Beth Shean Valley or a site across the Jordan River.

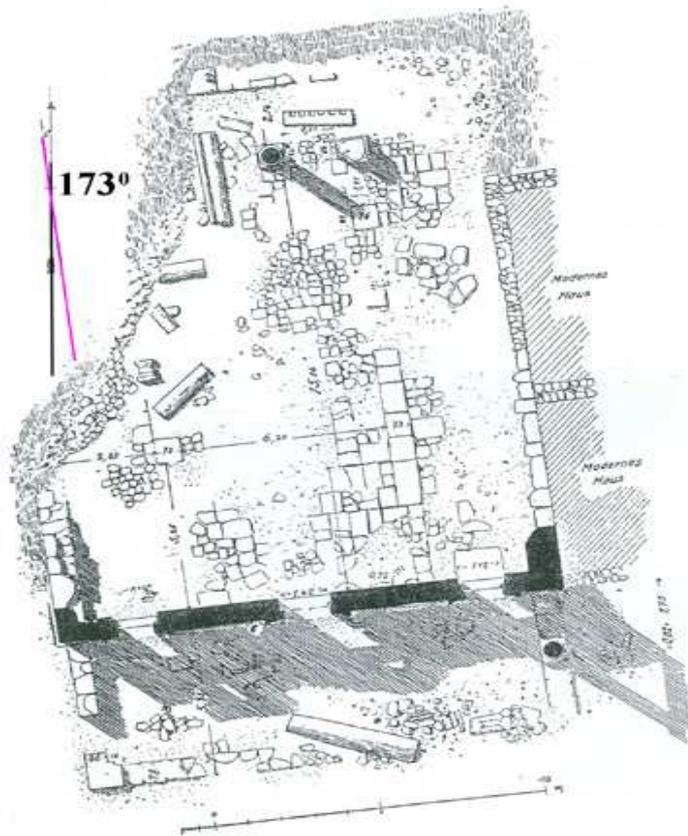


Figure 3.7. The edifice at Kefr Bir'im (Kohl & Watzinger 1916: Tafel XII)

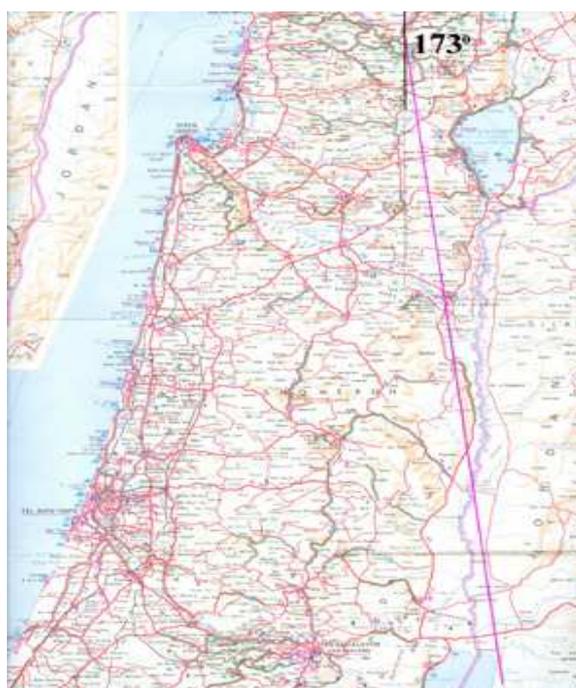


Figure 3.8. The orientation of the edifice at Bar'am towards an unknown site

The synagogues at Kefar-Neburaya (north of Safed), and a church at Susita pointed to Arbel. The synagogue at Arbel pointed towards an unknown site in the Beth Shean Valley, or a site across the Jordan river (Figure 3.9)

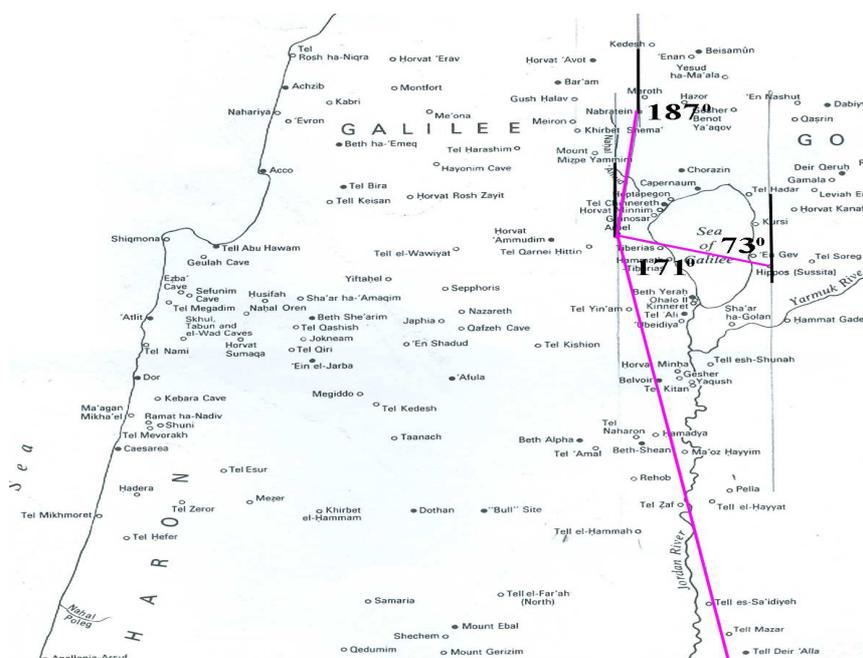


Figure 3.9. The orientations Arbel towards an unknown site in the Beth Shean Valley, or across the Jordan River

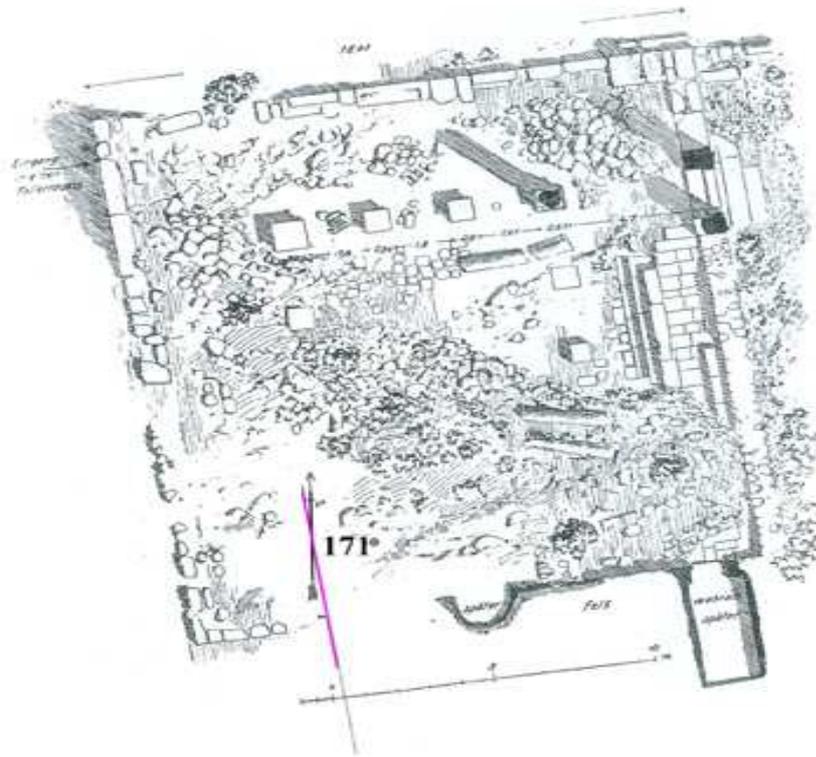


Figure 3.10. The site at Irbid (Arbela) (Kohl & Watzinger 1916: Tafel VIII)

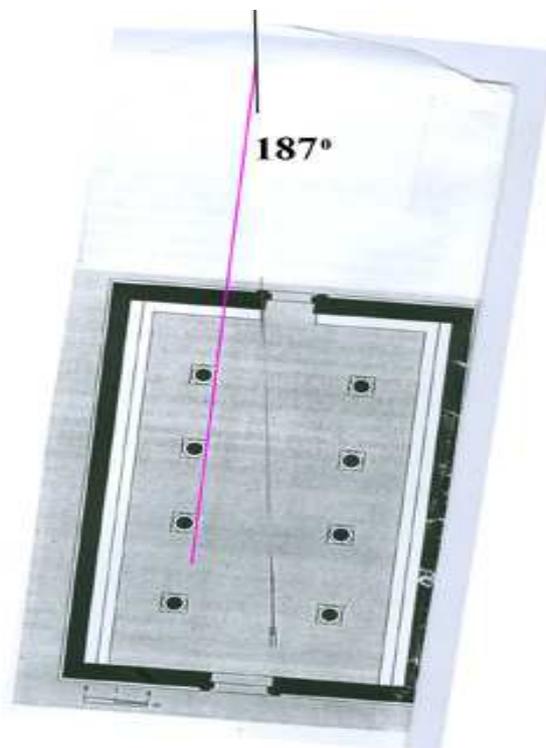


Figure 3.11. The site at Neburaya



Figure 3.12. The orientation of Neburaya towards Arbel

A church at Susita (Hippos) oriented northwest. One would expect a church to be built on east-west orientation.

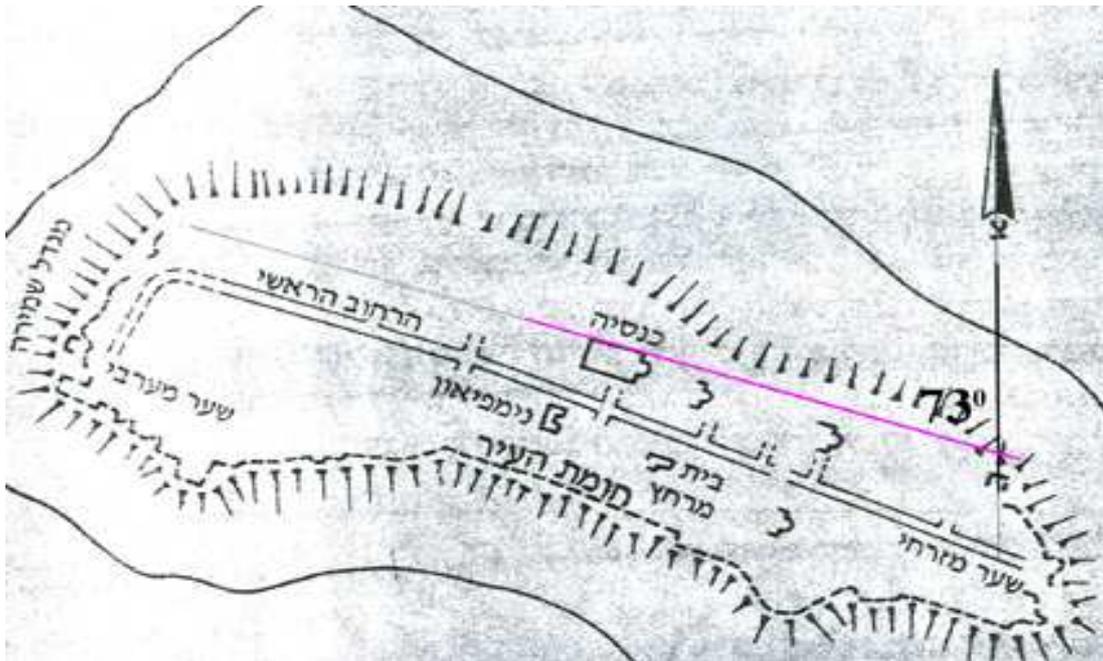


Figure 3.13. A church at Susita (Madrach Israel, 1980)

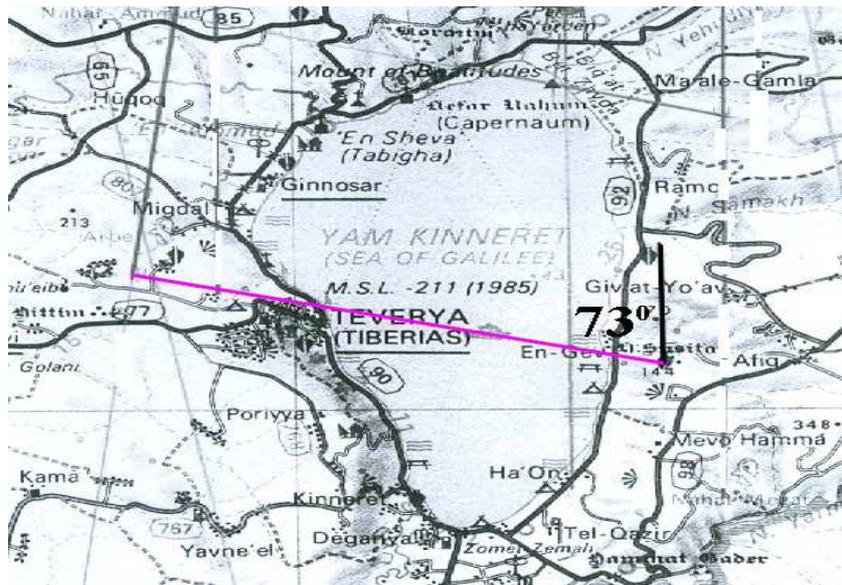


Figure 3.14. The orientation of a church at Susita towards Arbel

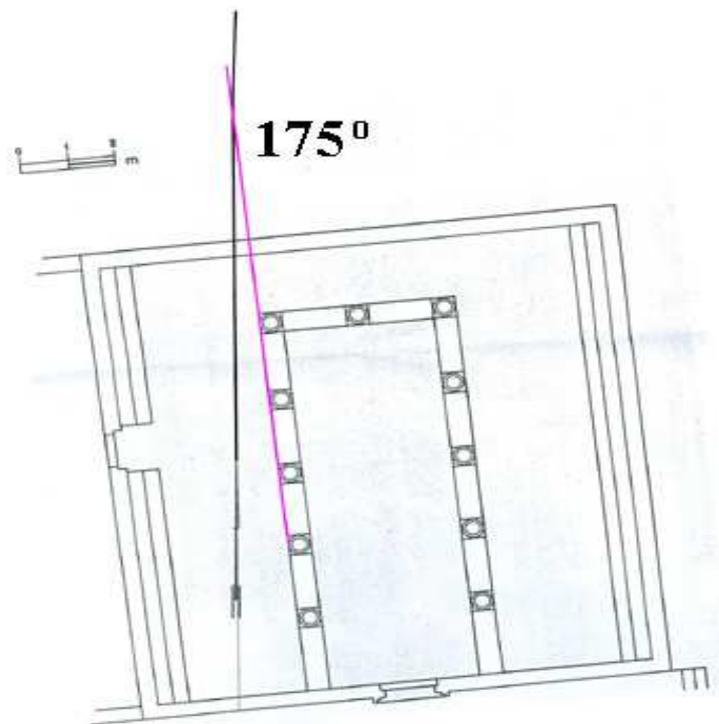


Figure 3.15. The site at Gush Halav



Figure 3.16. The orientation of Gush Chalav edifice towards an unknown site in the Beth Shean Valley or across the Jordan River

Pella is the place across the Jordan River where, according to Eusebius, the Christian community of Jerusalem escaped during the siege of the city by the Roman army. Pella became an important Christian center in subsequent centuries (NEAEHL 1993, s.v. Pella).

The synagogue at Sepphoris oriented towards Pella. Based on finds discovered under the foundations of the synagogue, in particular the coins in the bedding layer of the mosaic floor, the excavators concluded that it was built in the early 5<sup>th</sup> century (Weiss & Netzer 1996: 12). In this case the edifice could not have belonged to those temples built by Maximinus. I suggest that the orientation towards Pella and the pagan symbols rule out that this was a Jewish synagogue.

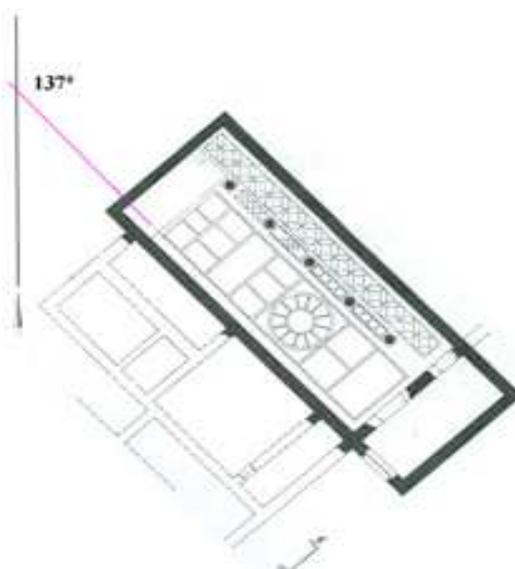


Figure 3.17. The structure at Sepphoris

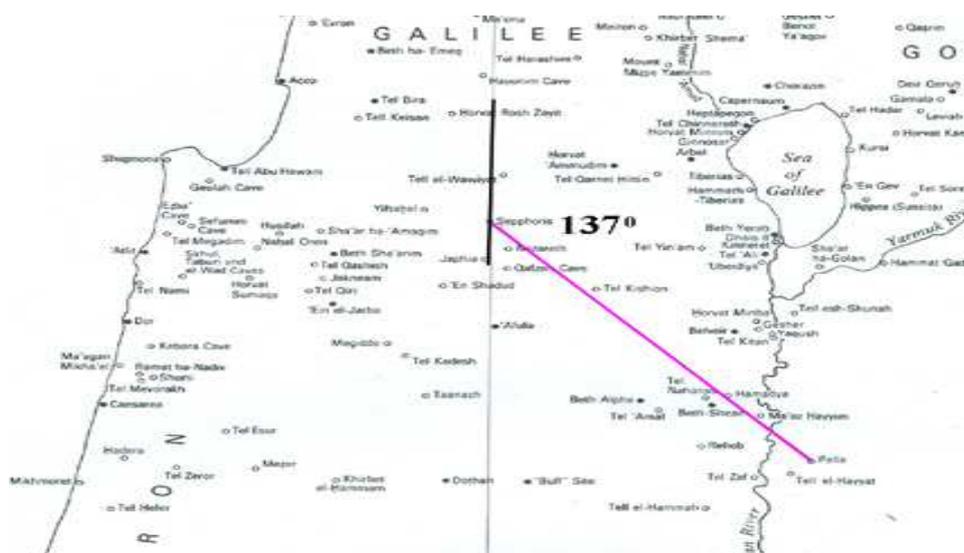


Figure 3.18. The orientation of the synagogue of Sepphoris towards Pella.

The synagogues at Hammath-Tiberias, Capernaum, Japhia (near Nazareth), and the unfinished synagogue at Hurvat-Sumaqa (Mount Carmel) pointed towards the vicinity of the synagogue at Hammath-Gader. The synagogue at Kanaf (east of the Sea of Galilee) pointed towards the vicinity of Capernaum. The direction of the mosaic at Hammath-Gader synagogue leads to Pella (east of the Jordan River) and the apse southward towards an unknown site.

At Hammath-Tiberias several superimposed buildings were found, and beneath them was a public building whose function is not clear. I suggest that the original building may have indeed been a Jewish synagogue but that the site was later confiscated for other purposes, an act which needed the

blessing of the authorities, that is, the Romans. In many other places there were two or more layers of construction.

The orientation of the synagogue at Japhia is from west to east, which is certainly not in the direction of Jerusalem. Sukenik argued that this change of orientation could be explained by the fact that Japhia was in Zebulun, presumed to be located on the sea, i.e., west of the Holy City.

Figure 3.11 illustrates the double orientation of the edifice in Hammat Gader. The *bema* orientated towards an unknown site and the floor towards Pella. The latter line oriented also towards the spot where according to some Christian traditions John the Baptist baptized Jesus.

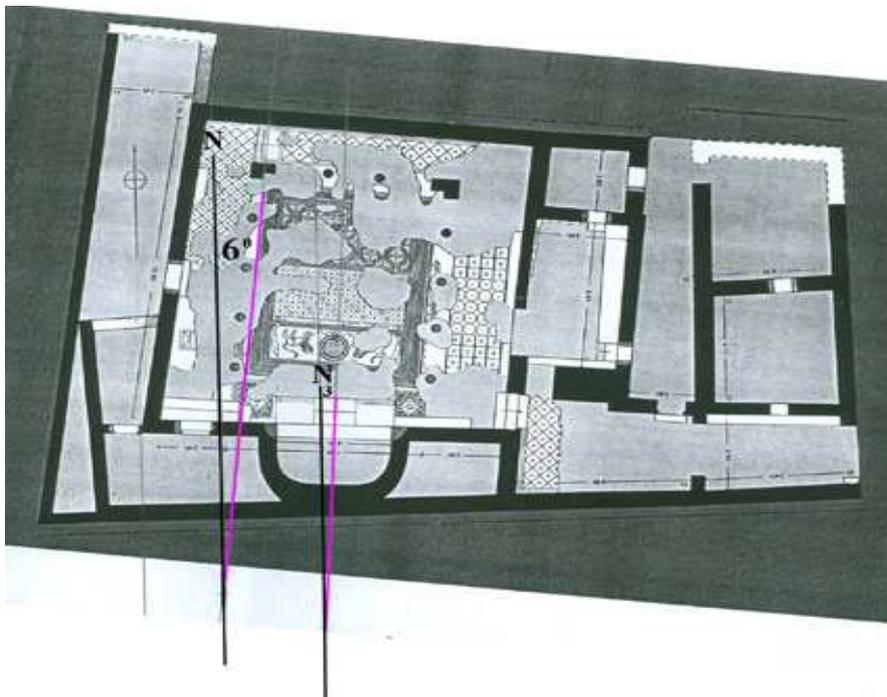


Figure 3.19. The double orientation of the edifice at Hammat Gader

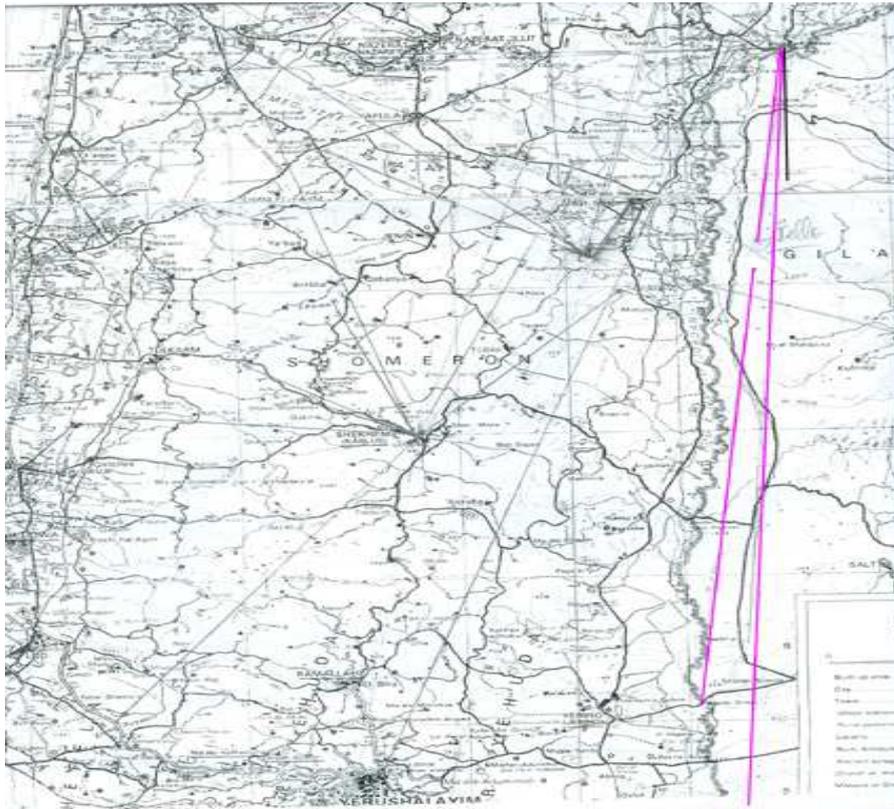


Figure 3.20. The orientations of the edifice at Hammat-Gader towards Pella and an unknown site

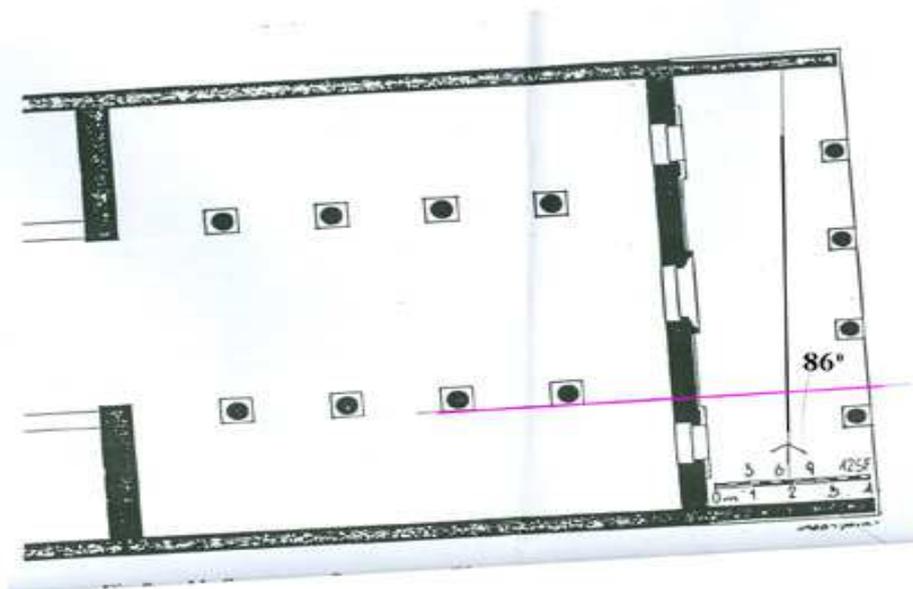


Figure 3.13. The structure at Horvat Sumaqa



Figure 3.22. The orientation of the edifice at Sumaqa towards Hammat Gader

Japhia is situated about 2 kilometers southwest of Nazareth.

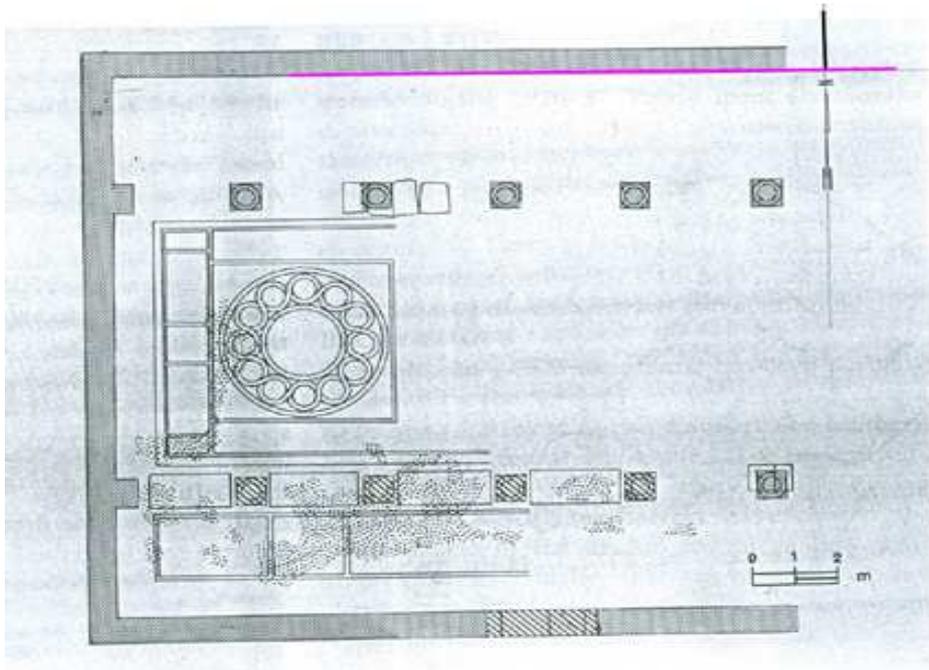


Figure 3.23. The structure at Japhia



Figure 3.24. The orientation of Japhia towards Hammat Gader

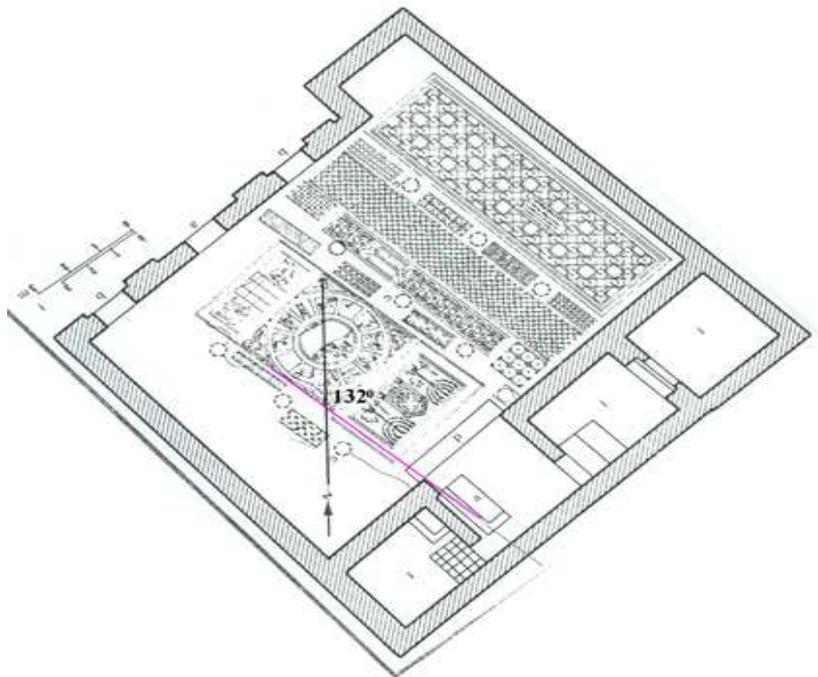


Figure 3.25. The edifice at Hammat-Tiberias

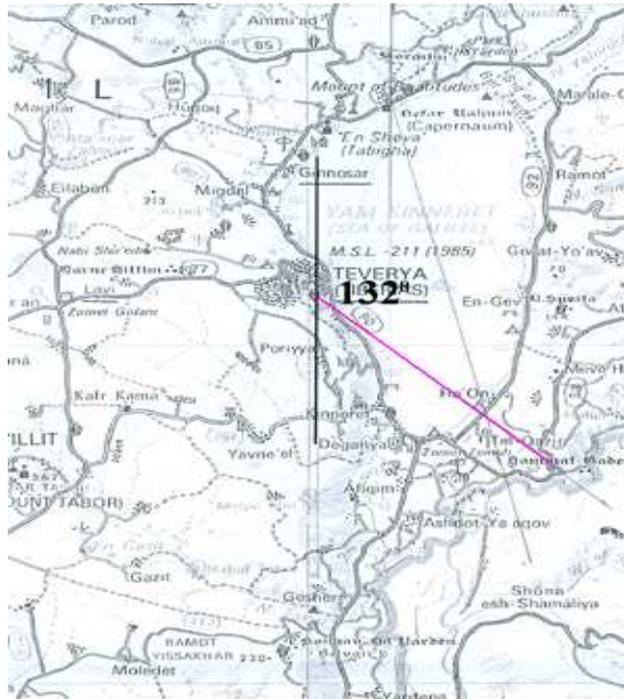


Figure 3.26. The orientation of Hammat-Tiberias towards Hammat Gader

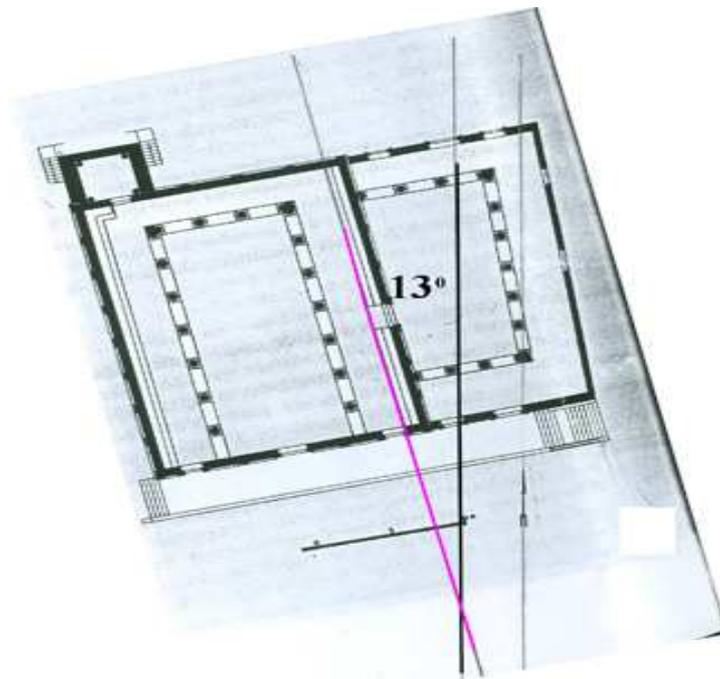


Figure 3.27. The edifice at Capernaum



Figure 3.28. The orientation of Capernaum towards the vicinity of Hammat Gader

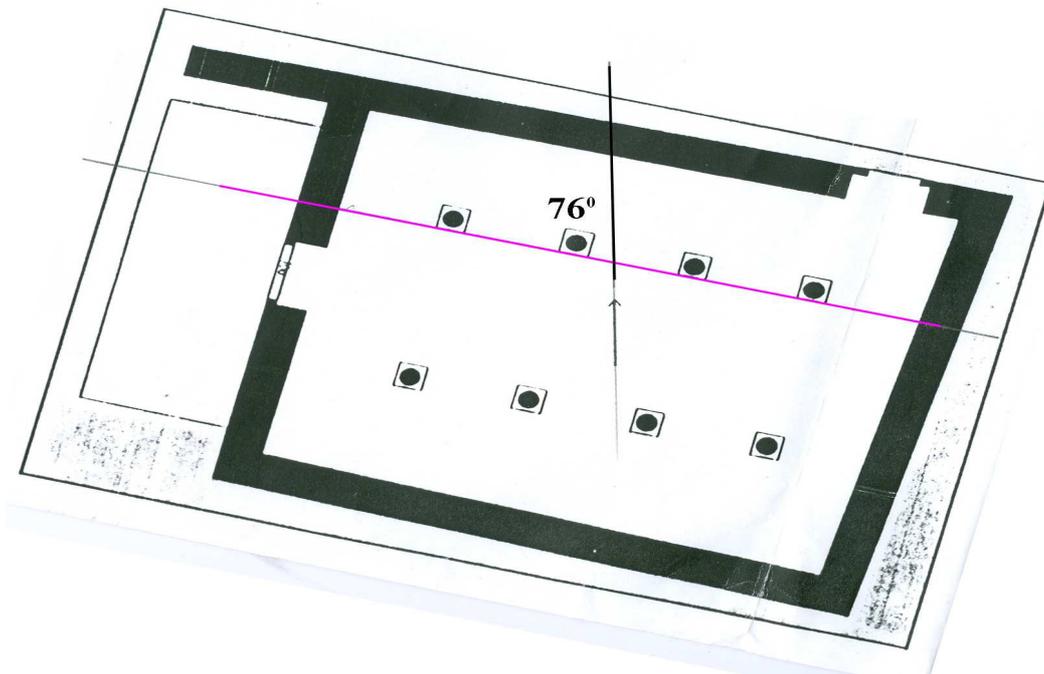


Figure 3.29. The edifice at Kanaf



Figure 3.22. The orientation of the edifice at Kanaf towards the vicinity of Capernaum

#### 4. Edifices that oriented towards Mount Gerizim

One central point of orientation of these ancient edifices appears to have been the massive Greek-style temple that seemed to have stood on the northernmost peak of Mount Gerizim – Tel er-Ras – and which was later completely demolished. Its massive Aswan granite columns were carried away and strewn around the northern base of Mount Gerizim, as if to erase traces of something to be concealed. The magnitude and technical sophistication of the remains implies Roman participation in the project. Archaeological evidence led the excavator to conclude that the building was the Temple of Zeus built by the Emperor Hadrian (117–138 C.E.).

As mentioned above, the edifice at Beth Alpha oriented towards Mount Gerizim. The edifice of Horvat-Rimmon, located in the southern Judaeen Shephelah about 1/2 km south of Kibbutz Lahav, pointed towards Mount Gerizim. The synagogue in En Gedi faced north; its mosaic pointed towards Mount Gerizim and its *bema* towards Na'aran. The line across the synagogue at Eshtemoa (the Judean Desert) leads towards the synagogue at En-Gedi.

In the synagogue of En Gedi an inscription consisting of 18 lines was revealed. It calls down a curse on "anyone causing a controversy between a man and his fellows or who (says) slanders his friends before the gentiles or steals the property of his friends, or anyone revealing the secret of the town to the gentiles..." It was argued that the inscription was designed against those revealing the secrets of the balsam industry, but why was it placed in the synagogue and why did it prohibit revealing the secrets only to the Gentiles? Maybe the building served purposes it was not supposed to serve.

The synagogue of Maon (southwest of Gaza) pointed towards what was identified as a third-century Christian basilica at Emmaus (near Latrun). This basilica pointed towards the synagogue at En Gedi. The pavement of Maon has an interesting parallel in a church pavement found at nearby Shellal (which is presently preserved in Australia) and in the synagogue of Gaza.

Several structures which pointed to Mount Gerizim have been defined as "Samaritan synagogues." The ones at Shaalbim (near Latrun), Khirbet Samara, Tsur Natan (Khirbet-Mjadal), and Kefar-Fahma. A "Samaritan synagogue" discovered at Ramat-Aviv which faced east. The list may be extended also to the remains of ancient churches at Bardala, Mishmar Ha'emek and Khirbet-Jivris which pointed towards Mount Gerizim (as reported by Safrai 1977: 102). In 2010 remains of an ancient structure and a farmstead were exposed in an archaeological excavation southwest of Bet Shean. The front of the building faces southwest, toward Mount Gerizim, so the building has been

identified as an ancient Samaritans synagogue. In the center of the mosaic there is a Greek inscription of which a section of its last line was revealed: T[ ]OUTON NEWN meaning “This is the temple.”

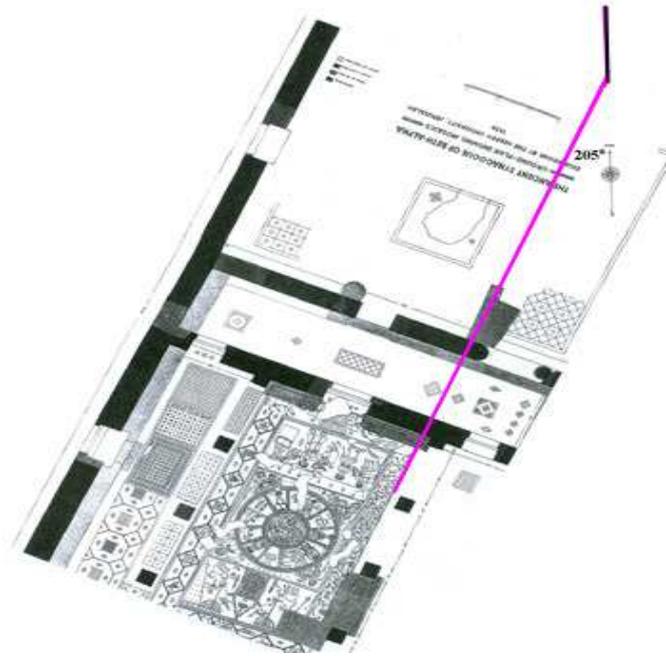


Figure 4.1. The ground plan of the edifice at Beth Alpha (Sukenik 1932)



Figure 4.2. The orientation of Beth Alpha towards Mount Gerizim

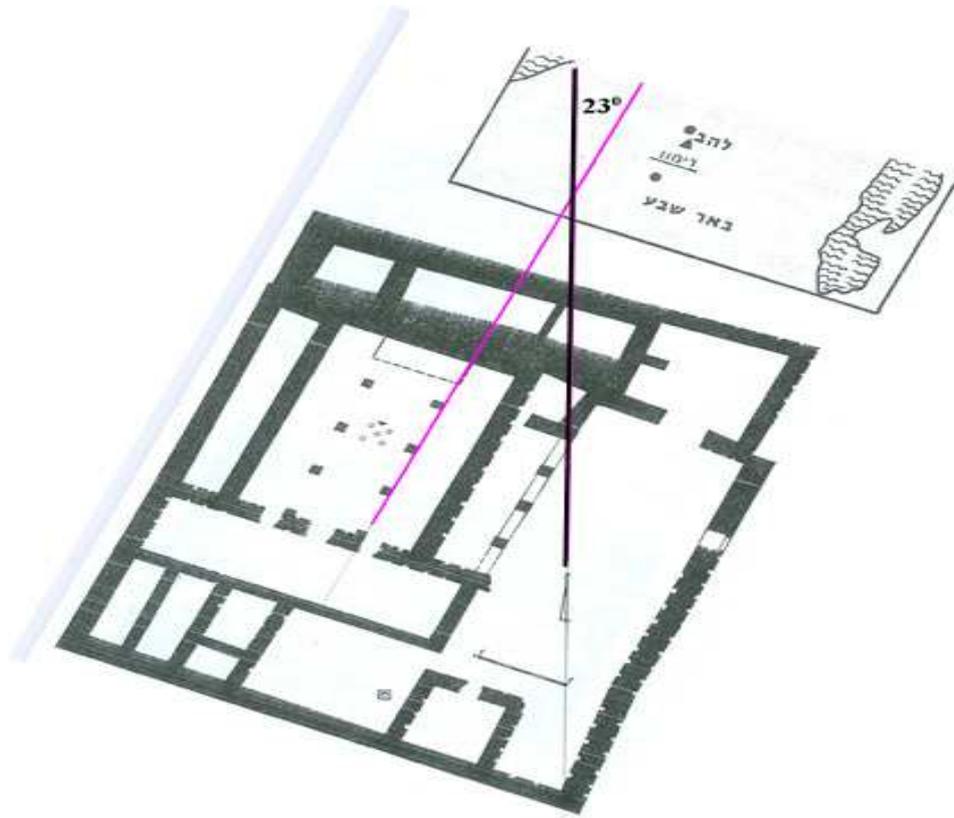


Figure 4.3. Horvat Rimmon (Kloner 1984: 65)

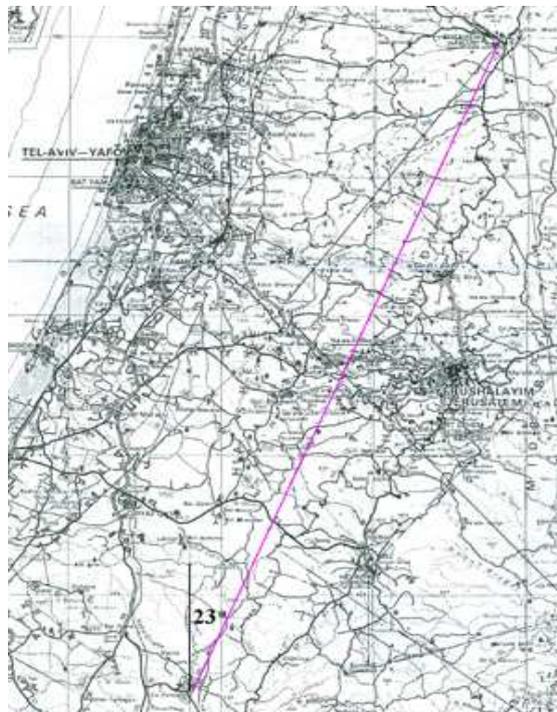


Figure 4.4. The orientation of Horvat Rimmon towards Mount Gerizim

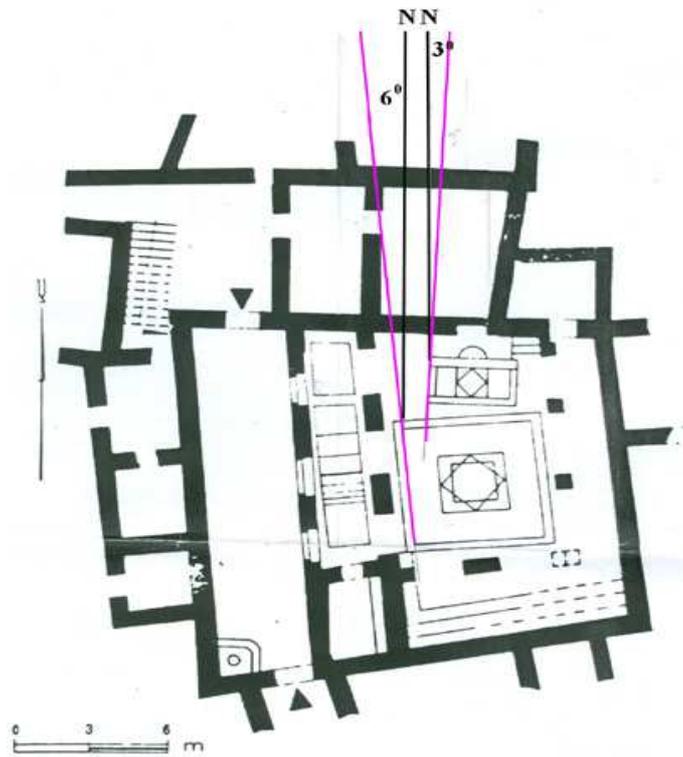


Fig. 3. Plan of 'En-Gedi synagogue complex.

After D. Barag, Y. Porat and E. Netzer,  
 "The Synagogue at 'En Gedi," in *Ancient  
 Synagogues Revealed*, ed. L. I. Levine  
 (Jerusalem/Detroit, 1982), p.117.

Figure 4.5. The double orientations of the floor and of the *bema* at En Gedi.

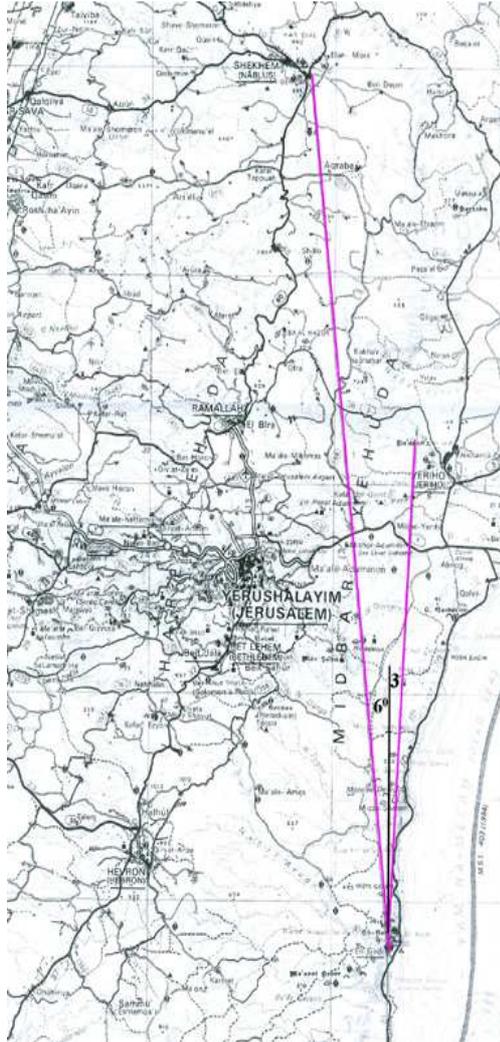


Figure 4.6. The orientation of the edifice at En Gedi towards Mount. Gerizim and Naaran

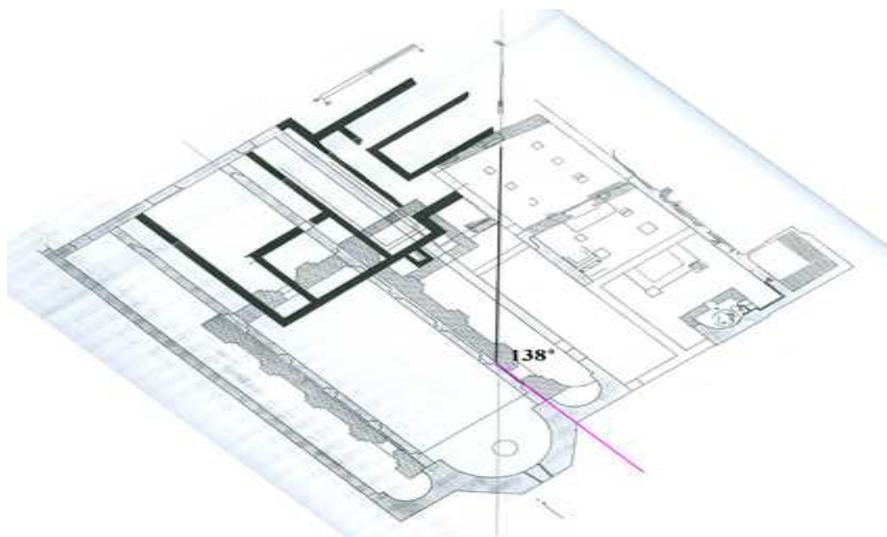


Figure 4.7. The church at Emmaus

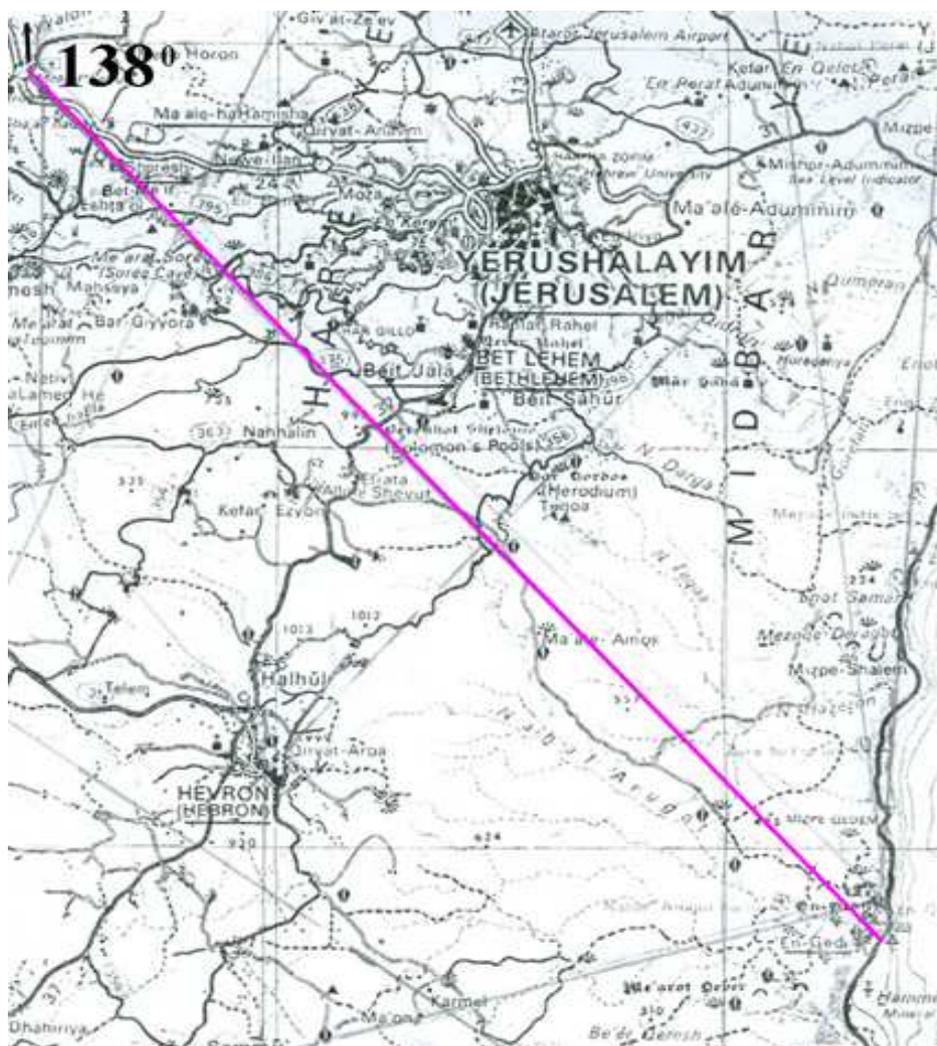


Figure 4.8. The orientation of the church at Emmaus towards En Gedi

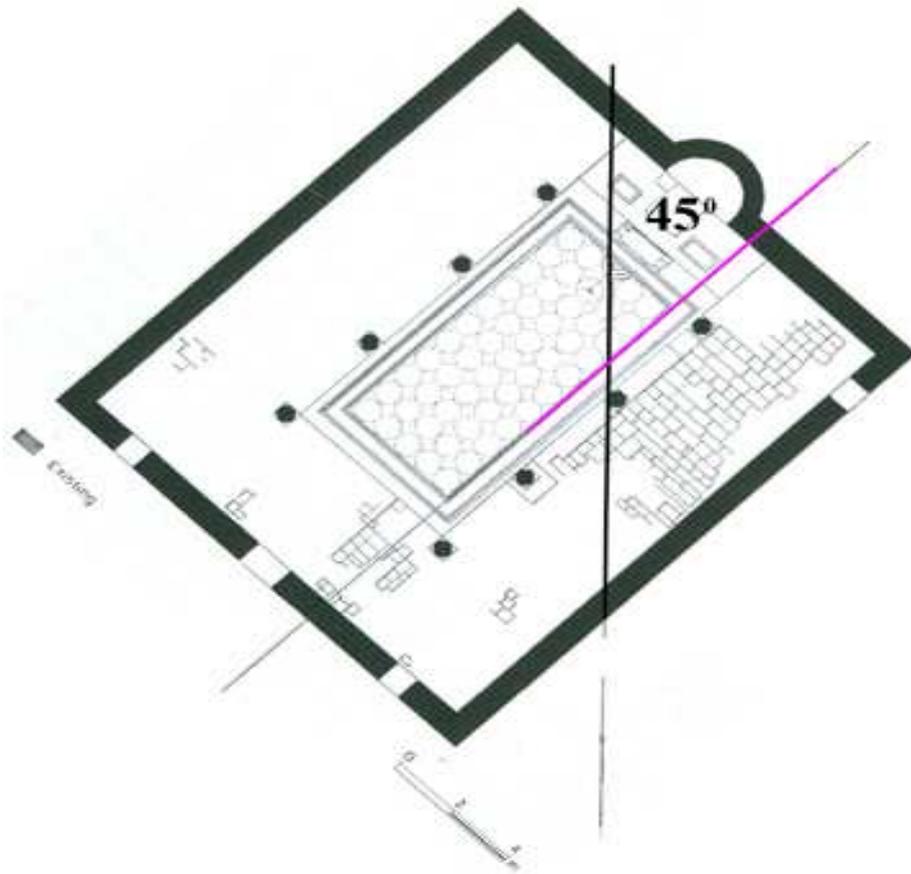


Figure 4.9. The structure at Maon



Figure 4.10. The orientation of Maon towards Emmaus

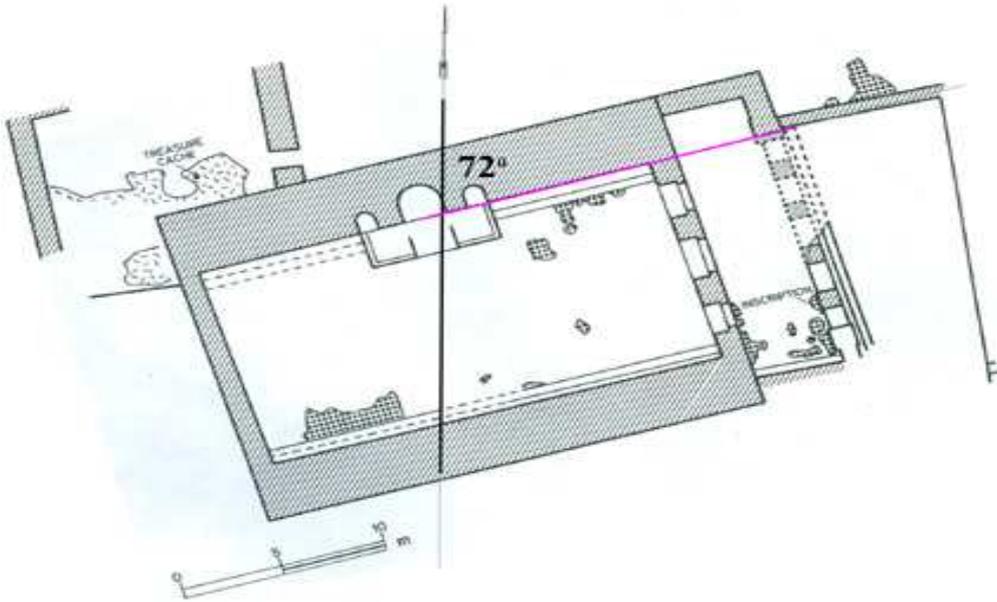


Figure 4.11. The site at Eshtemoa



Figure 4.11. The orientation of Eshtemoa towards En Gedi

## 5. Edifices oriented towards Mamre

According to ancient sources, there was a pagan altar at Mamre, 3 kilometers north of Hebron. The Emperor Constantine ordered the altar to be destroyed when he built a church there. This church was one of the first four Constantine built in the Land of Israel.

The synagogue at Jericho pointed towards Mamre. The *bema* of the synagogue at Susiya (in the Judean Desert) also oriented towards that place.

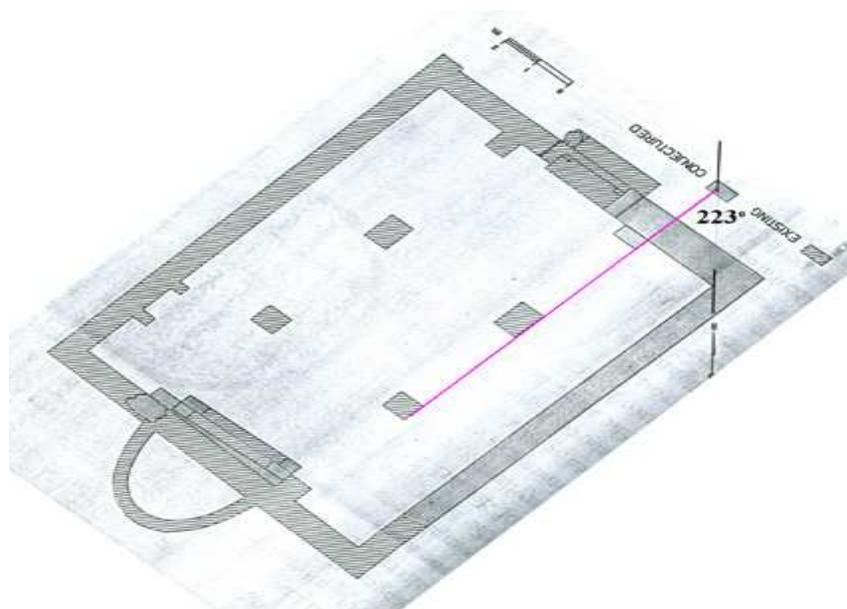


Figure 5.1. The edifice at Jericho



Figure 5.2. The orientation of the edifice at Jericho towards Mamre

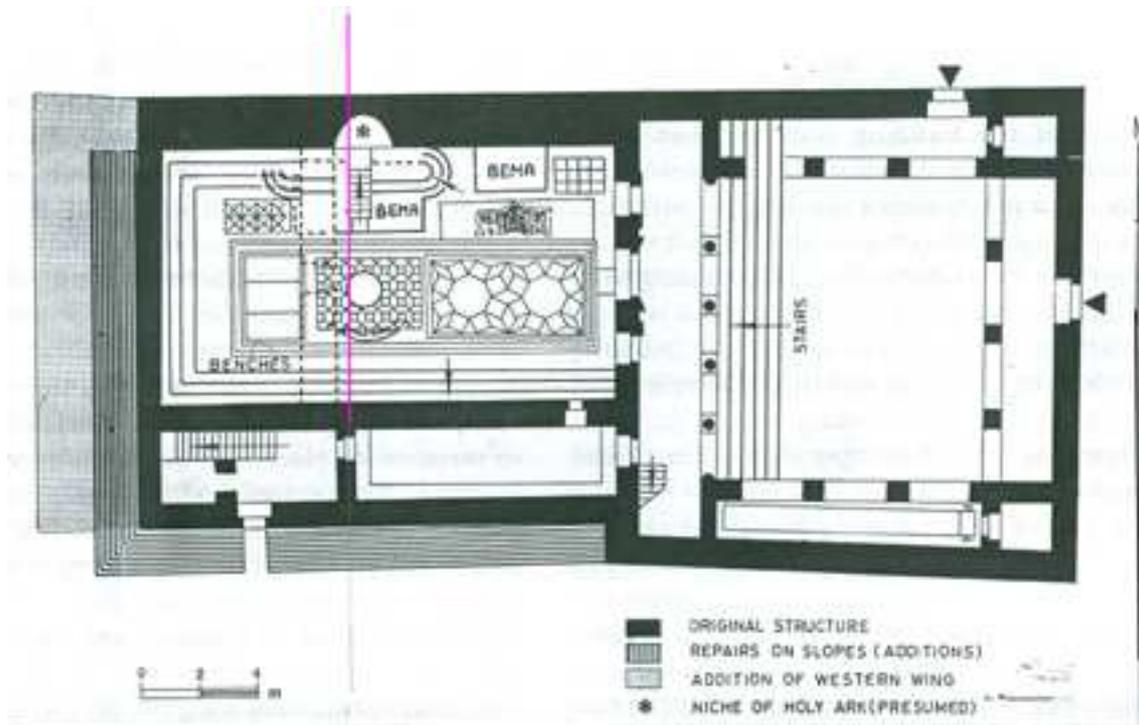


Figure 5.3. The edifice at Khirbet Susiya

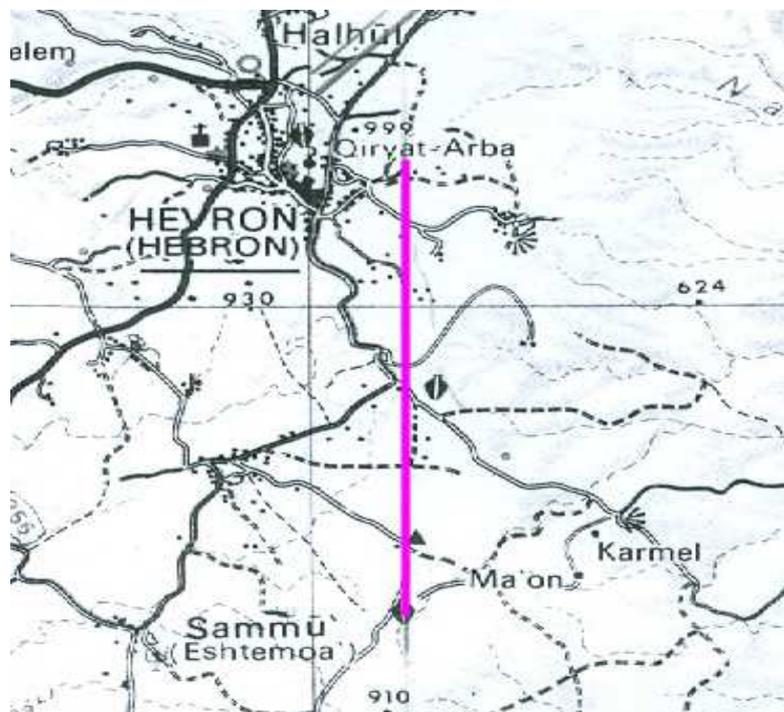


Figure 5.4. The orientation of the *bema* of Khirbet Susiya towards the vicinity of Mamre

## 6. Edifices Oriented Towards a Certain Point in the Beth Shean Valley

The precise nature of the design may indicate the existence of a presently unknown edifice. I suggest that there existed a building few kilometers southwest of Sdei Trumot, the intersection of the lines running through the floor at early Christian prayer hall from the 3rd Century discovered in 2005 at Megiddo (Tepper and Di Segni 2006), the so-called synagogues at Beth Shearim, Chorazim, and the one at Gerasa, which was found beneath a church Figure (6.1). This unknown building, if it indeed existed, may have pointed towards Jericho. The synagogue at Jericho pointed towards Mamre.

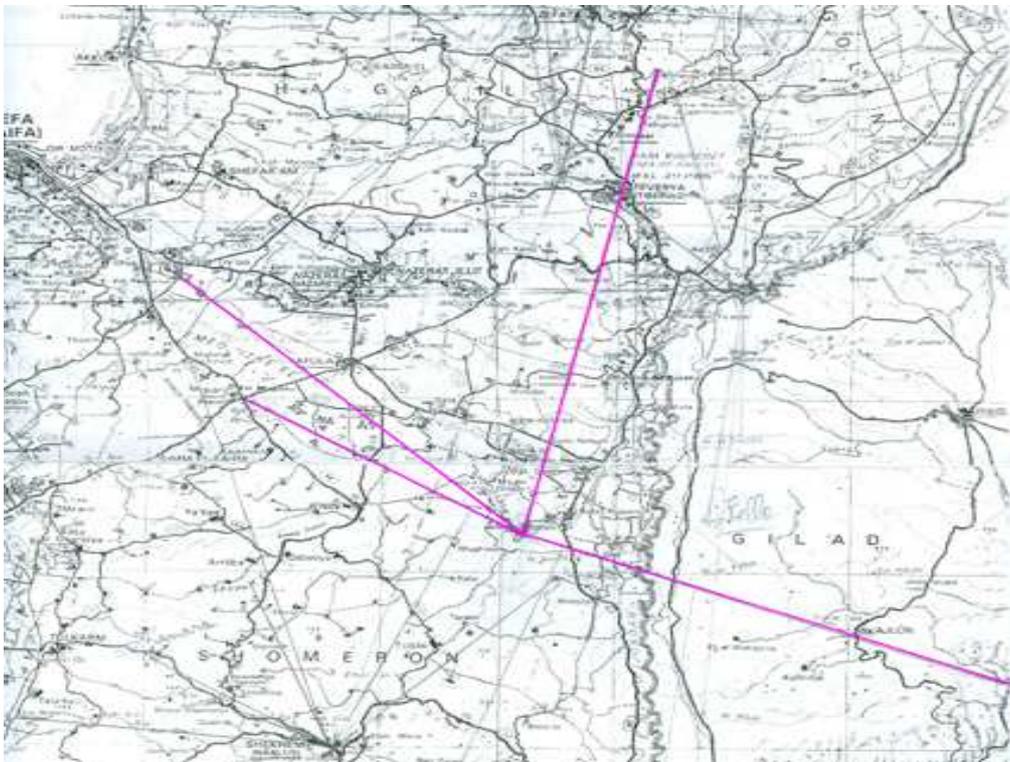


Figure 6.1. A missing link (a map of 1:400000)

Figure 6.2 illustrates the southern tip of same data (except Gerasa) on a map of a scale 1:50000.

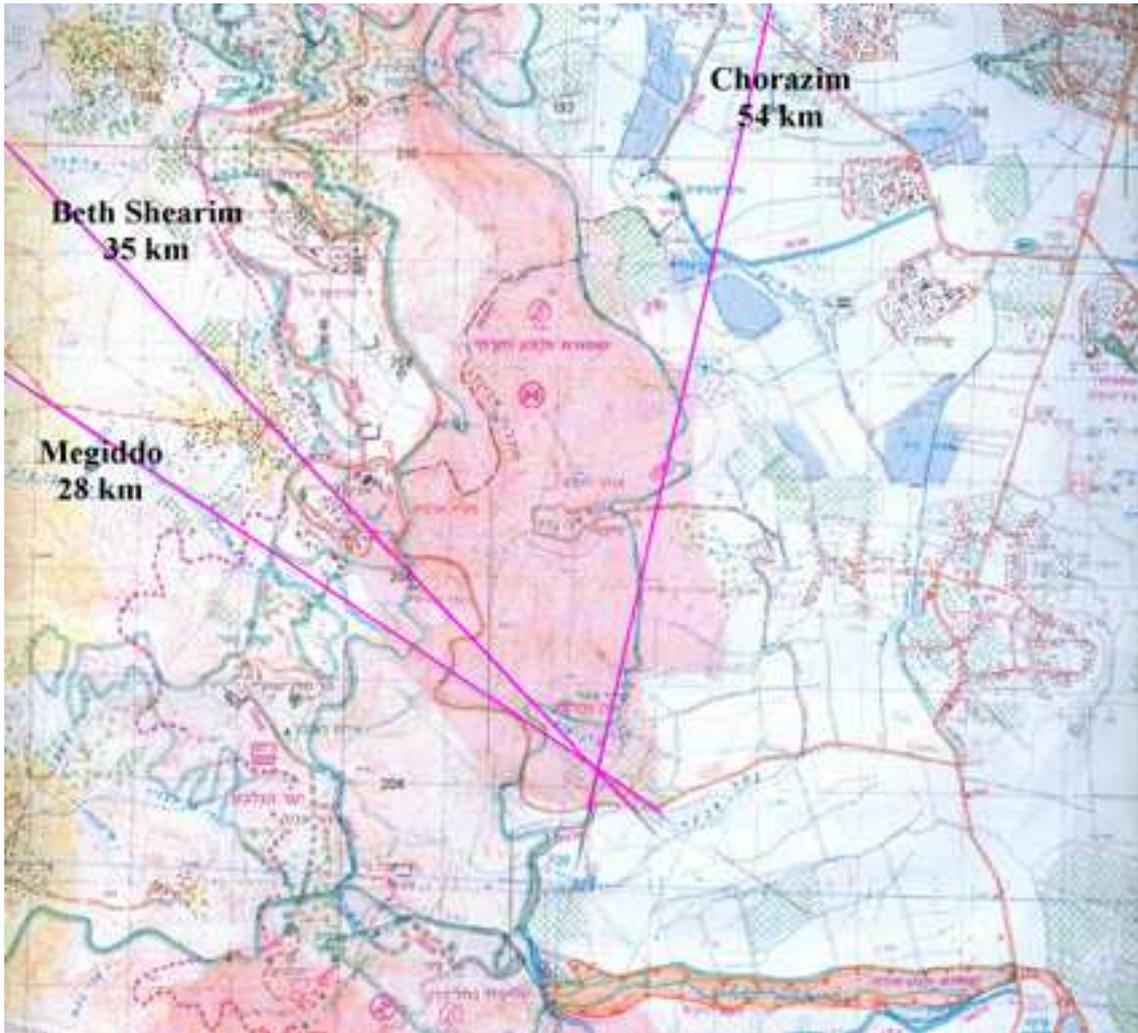


Figure 6.2. A missing link (a map of 1:50000)

Figure 6.3. displays the aerial view of the area as seen by Google Earth.



Figure 6.3. An aerial view of the area southwest of Sdei Trumot



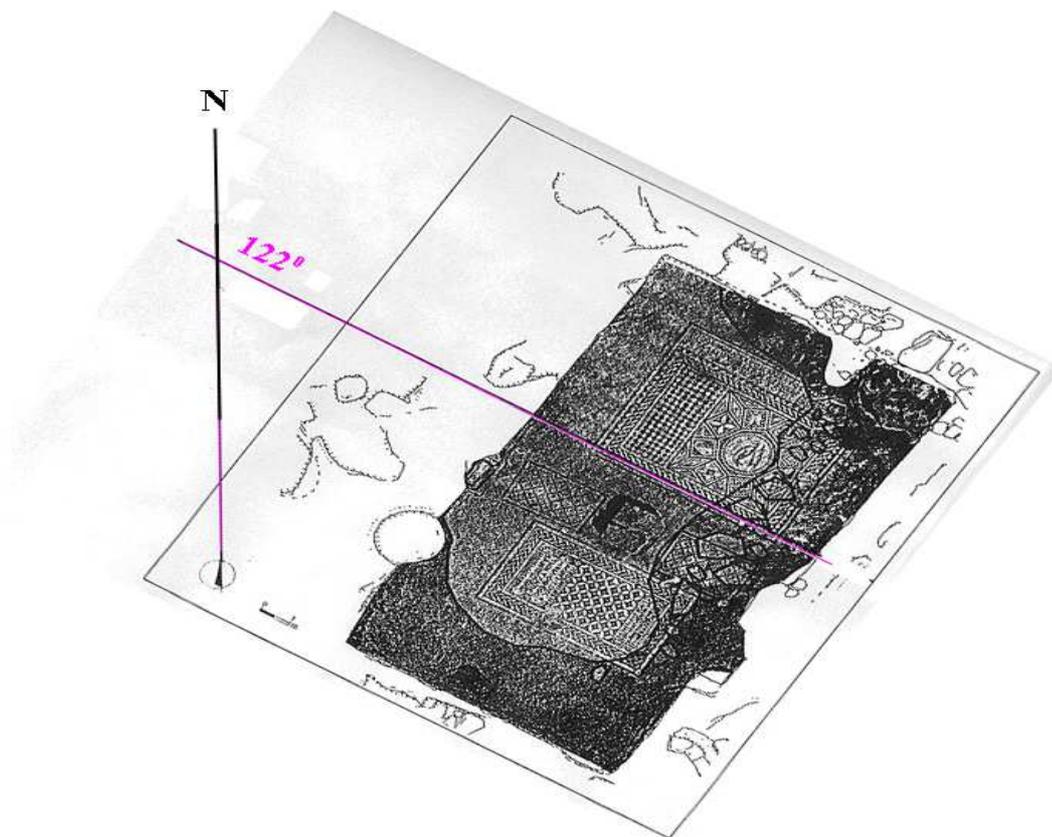


Figure 6.5. The orientation of the floor at Megiddo (Tepper and Di Segni 2006: 35)

The site is inside a prison and is closed to the public. Google Earth enables a glance at the area (Figure 6.6) without the need to commit a crime.

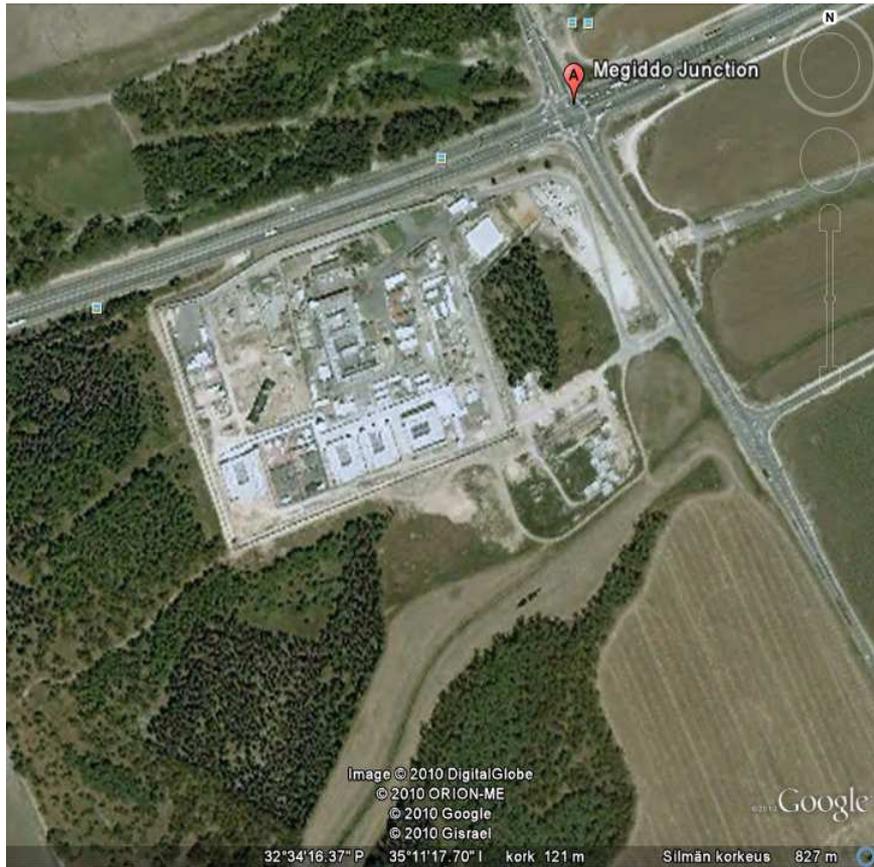


Figure 6.6. The aerial photo of the site at Megiddo

According to news reports describing the site, the ancient prayer hall is located in the western upper side of the prison.

For the location on the 1:50000 map, I just made a guess (Figure 6.7.).



Figure 6.7. Approximate location of the site at Megiddo



Figure 6.8. The location of the site at Chorazim

In the excavation files (Korazim, Ze'ev Yeivin, A-1105/1982) there is a good drawing of the site (Figure 6.9)

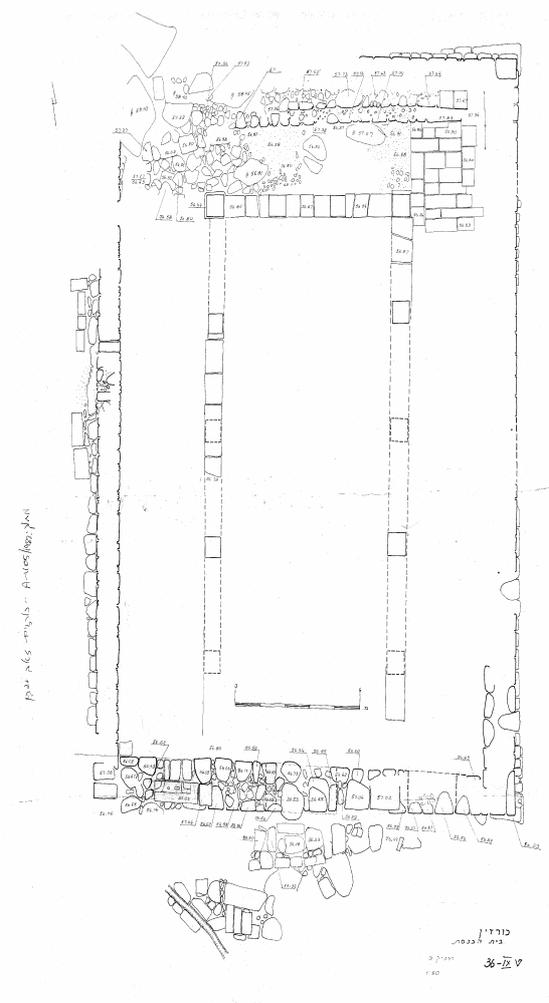


Figure 6.9. The plan of the site at Chorazim

For determining the orientation I used one line of columns (Figure 6.10).

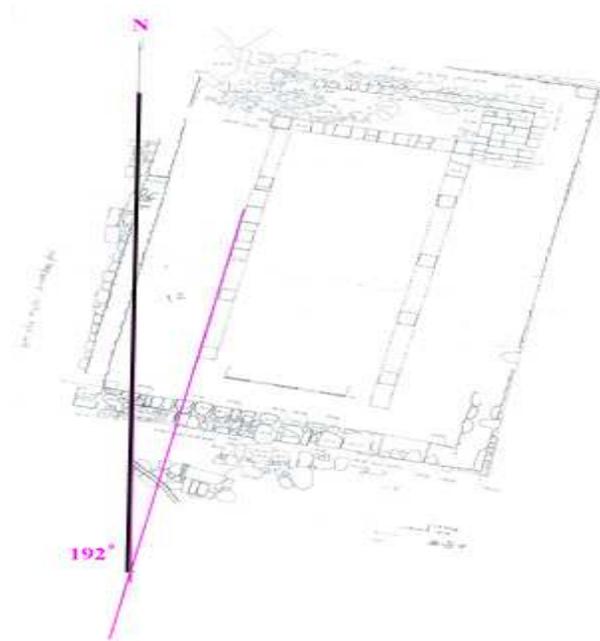


Figure 6.10. The orientation of the site at Chorazim

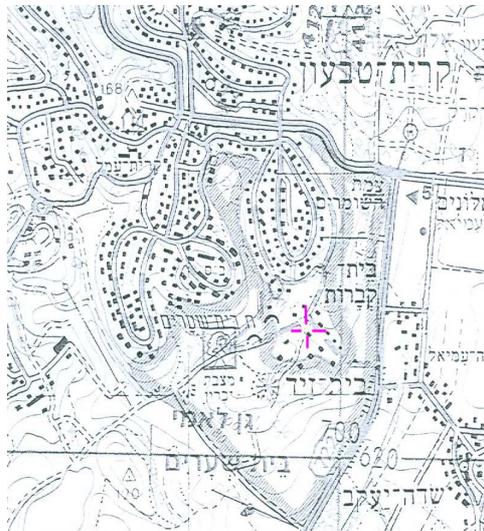


Figure 6.11. Approximate location of the site at Beth Shearim

Figure 6.12 displays the aerial photo of the area. I marked the site according to the link there.

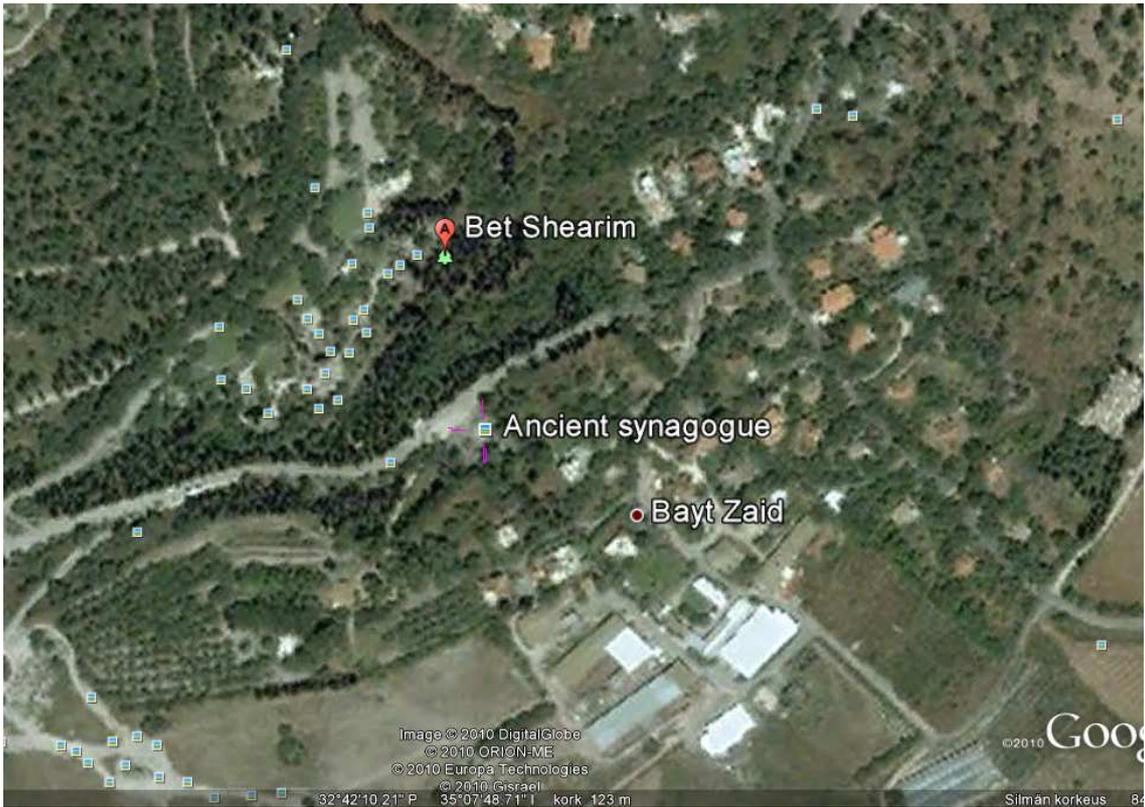


Figure 6.12 The aerial photo of the Beth Shearim area

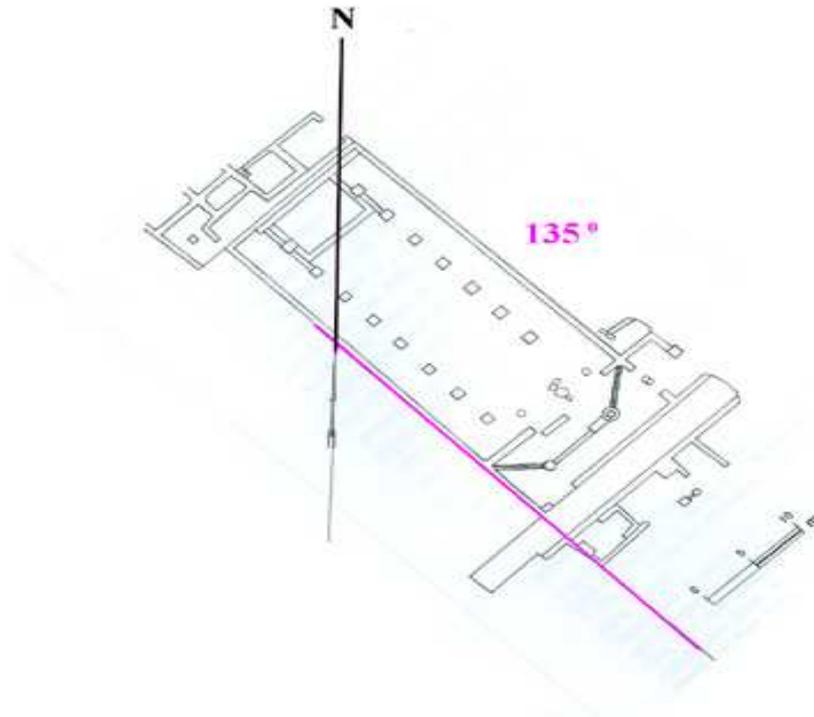


Figure 6.13. The orientation of the site at Beth Shearim

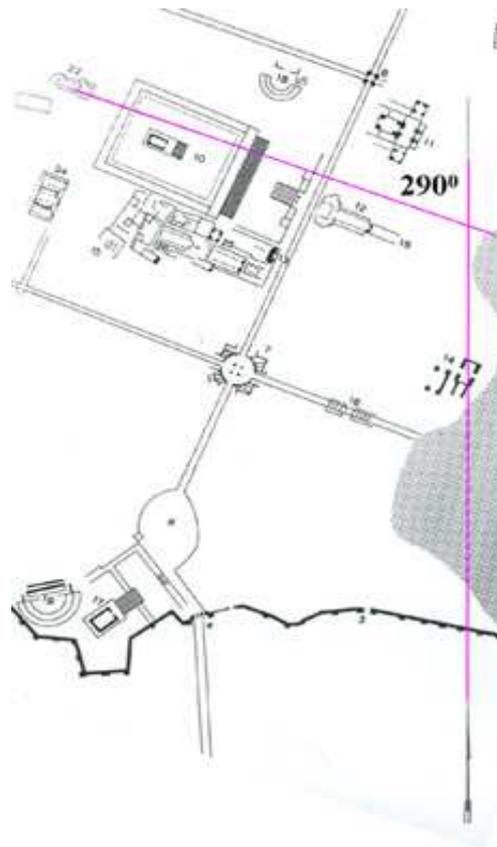


Figure 6.14. The site at Gerasa

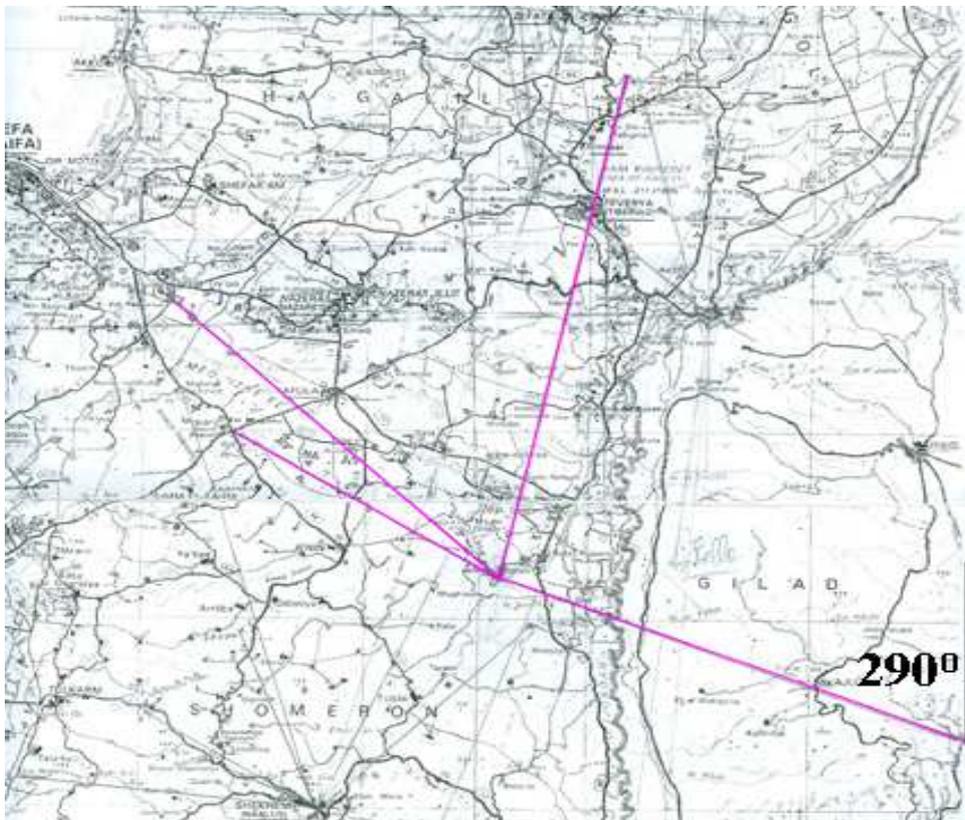


Figure 6.15. The orientation of the edifices at Gerasa towards the Beth Shean Valley

## 7. Various Orientations

The synagogue of Khirbet-Shema in Upper Galilee pointed towards Shavei Ziyon, on the shore of the Mediterranean Sea, where remains of an ancient church were found. The edifice at ed Dikkeh oriented towards the vicinity of Shavei Ziyon.

The synagogue at Qtzrin oriented towards Jerusalem, the only one I could find among all these structures. The synagogue at Gaza oriented southeast, towards an unknown site.

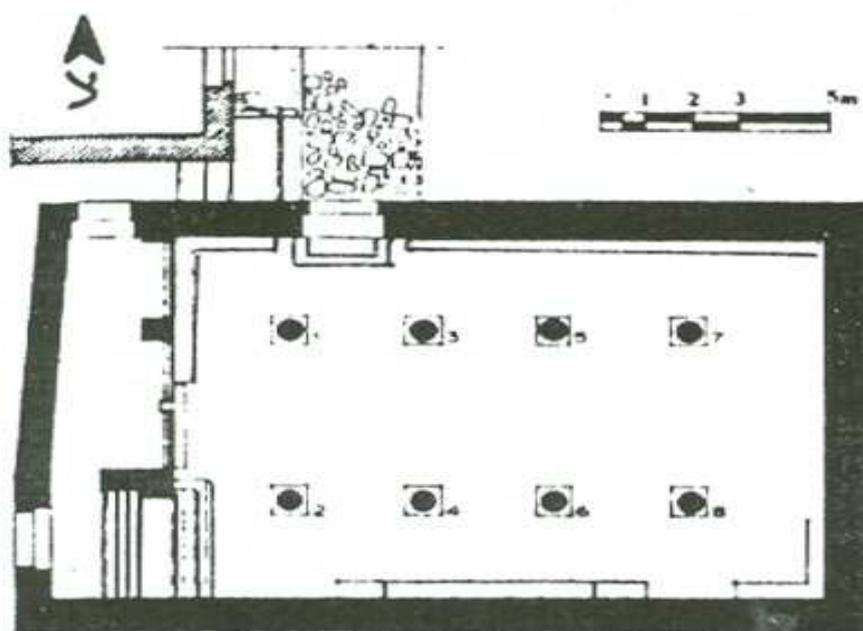


Figure 7.1. The Hirbet Shema east-west orientation

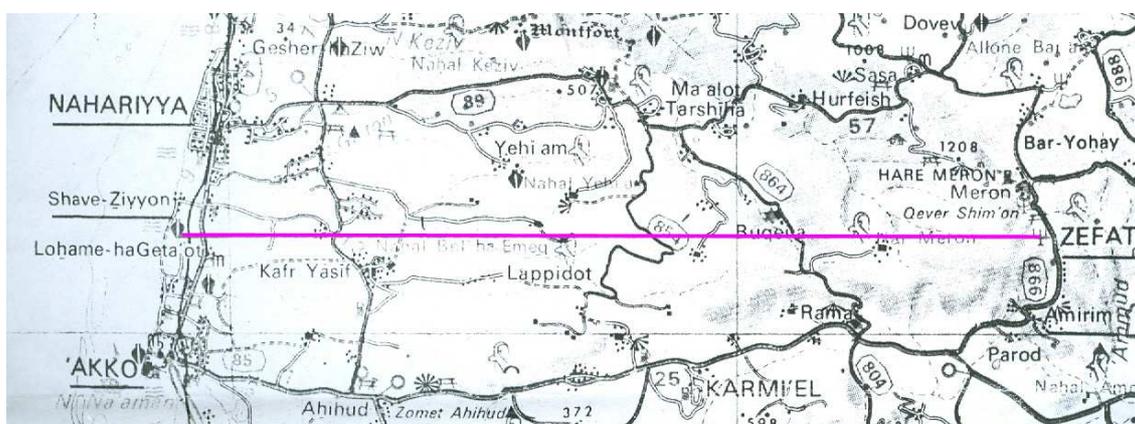


Figure 7.2. The orientation of Hirbet Shema towards remains of an ancient church at Shavei Zion.

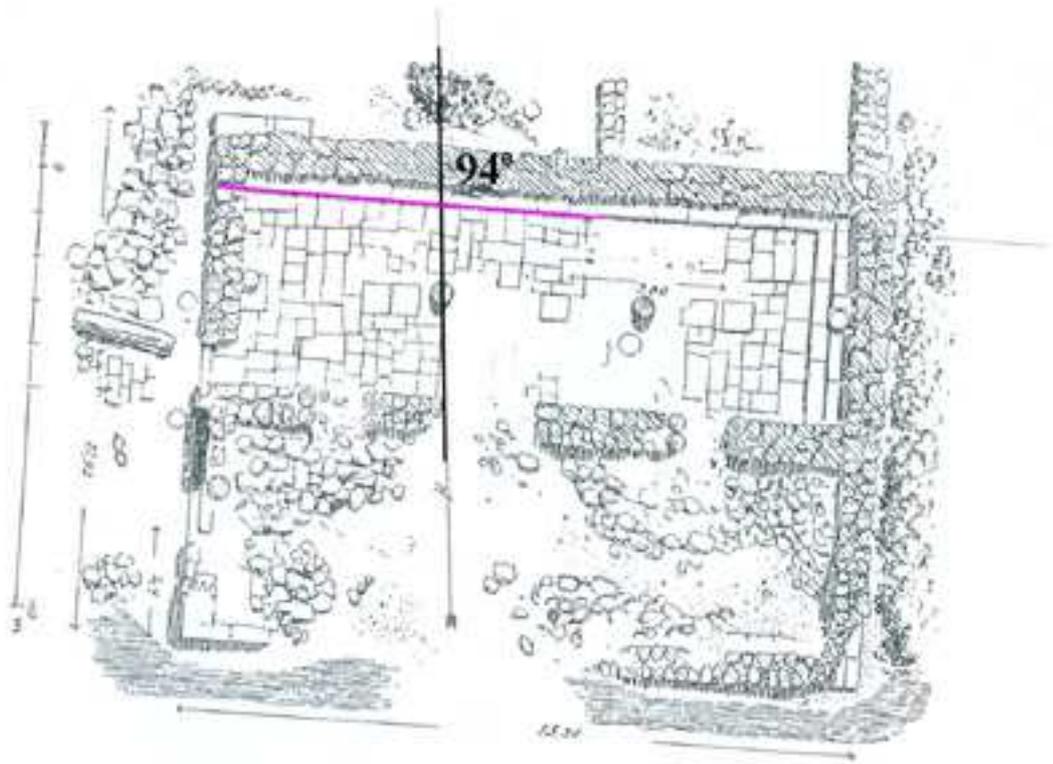


Figure 7.3. The edifice at ed Dikke (Kohl & Watzinger 1916: Tafel XVI)



Figure 7.4. The orientation of ed Dikkeh towards the vicinity of Shavei Zion

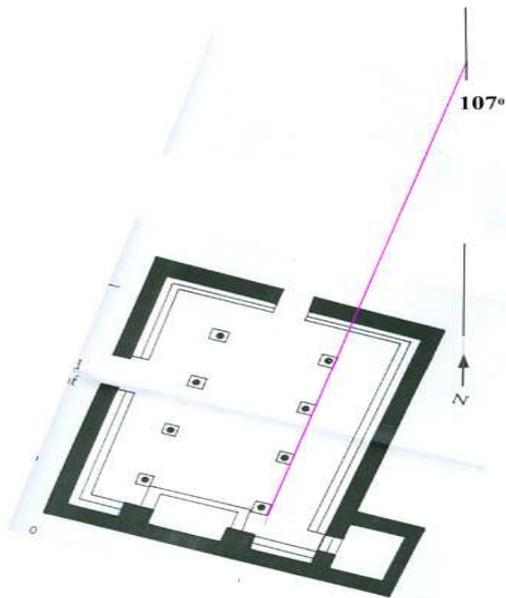


Figure 7.5. The edifice at Qasrin (Maoz & Killebrew 1988: 8)

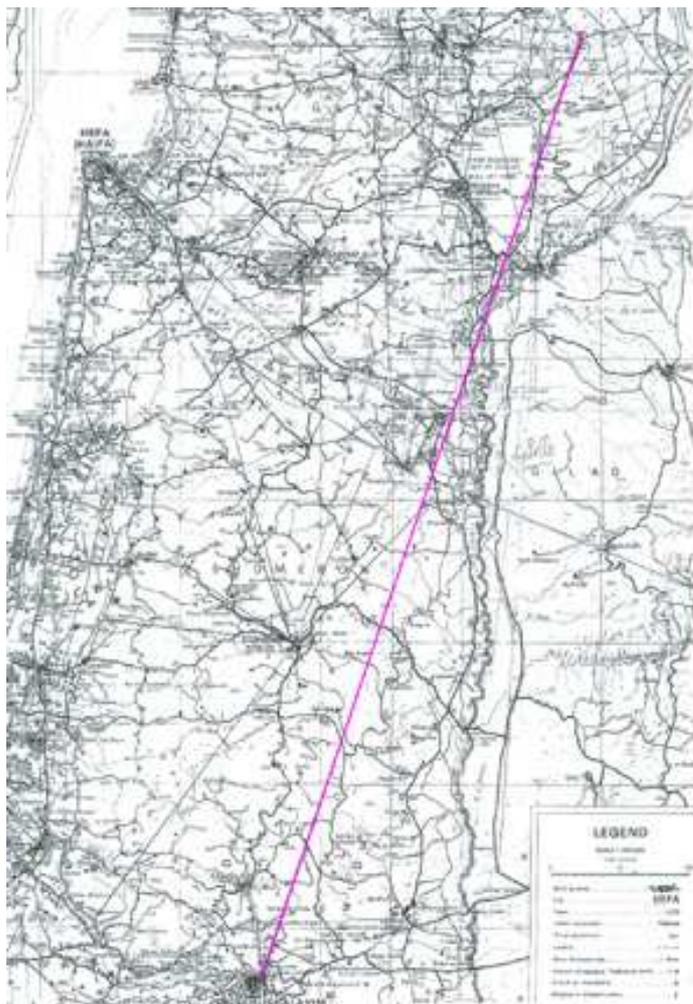


Figure 7.6. The orientation of Qasrin towards Jerusalem

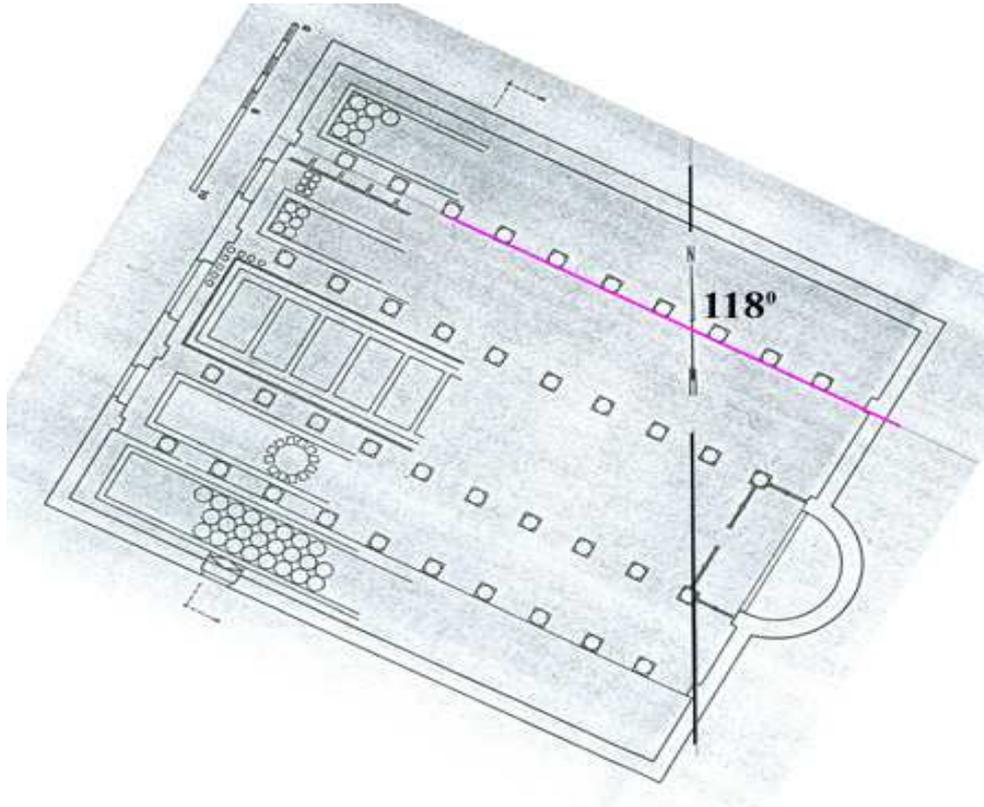


Figure 7.7. The edifice at Gaza

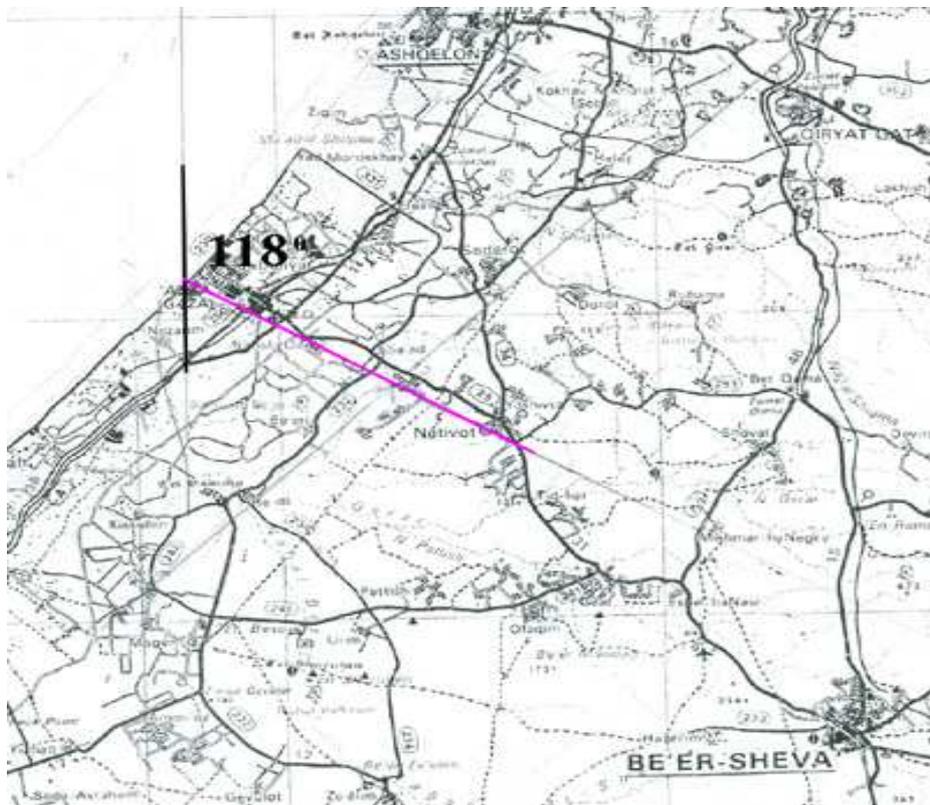


Figure 7.8. The orientation of Gaza southeast

## 6. Discussion

By default every ancient public structure found in the land of Israel from the second to the fifth centuries is automatically defined as an ancient synagogue. One recent example is Horvat Kur, not far from Lake Kinneret; where only remnants of one wall were found, and still it was publicly announced that a new ancient synagogue was found. The only exceptions are structures that oriented towards Mount Gerizim, which are automatically categorized as ancient Samaritan synagogue, or those oriented directly east, which must be ancient churches.

However, that may not always be the correct identification. Safrai (2003: 245) wrote:

The house of Leontis at Beth Shean (ancient Scythopolis), from the fourth and the fifth centuries, was excavated in 1964 and published in brief in 1973, and the inscriptions it contains were gathered in a collection of synagogue inscriptions. The mosaic is described in the collections of mosaics as belonging to a synagogue in every sense. The present article suggests the probable identification of this structure as a Judeo-Christian house of prayer. At first glance this proposal would seem to be overly audacious, but as we shall see, such a premise is not without basis.

In the article Safrai endeavors to demonstrate that owner of the house belonged to a sect known as the Ebionites and the prayer place was a dedicated room in a private house .

I suggest that many of the so-called ancient "synagogues" and other structures mentioned above were originally, or for a certain period of time, the designated temples built according to Maximinus' decree. The accuracy and the systematic nature of the grids indicate that many of those structures were part of a single master plan.

Actually, among the "synagogues" I checked only the one southeast of Qasrin in the Golan Heights pointed directly towards Jerusalem. This does not necessarily mean, however, that this structure was a Jewish synagogue. The synagogue on Massada oriented northwest, not exactly towards Jerusalem. I doubt whether there was ever a custom to construct synagogues in the precise direction of Jerusalem. Neither were those buildings orienting towards Mount Gerizim necessarily Samaritan synagogues. By the Samaritans' own account, they strictly observe the Second Commandment.

I suggest that the reason for building these temples was to counter the rising power of Christianity.

Since persecutions and executions made the situation only worse by creating martyrs, a new method was devised. History books talk about a revival of pagan worshipping during the days of Maximinus Daia (Grant 1975). The scheme did not have to possess any logic. In Eusebius's description of Maximinus, there might be an answer to this puzzle:

In truth he carried his drunken excesses to such a point that he became mad and deranged in his cups, and when drunk would give such orders as he would repent of next day when he was sober. (Ecclesiastical History, VIII 14: 11)

On the people that carried out Maximinus' plans, Eusebius wrote (Ecclesiastical History, Book VIII, chapter 1:8):

...and he appointed idol priests in every locality and city, and over them as high priest of each province one of those engaged in statecraft, who was the most manifestly distinguished in every branch of the public service, with an escort and bodyguard soldiers; and he recklessly bestowed government and the greatest privileges on all charlatans, as if they were pious and dear to gods. Henceforward he vexed and oppressed, not a single city nor even district, but the provinces under him completely and as a whole, by exaction of gold and silver and unspeakably large amount of goods, and by the heaviest assessments and varied fines.

However, the scheme did not work. It seems that the Roman Empire was quite weakened at that time and, moreover, Maximinus' policy against Christian was not consistent (see Grant 1975). Therefore, I suggest that various Christian sects were secretly using those buildings as clandestine worshipping places. That may explain the 'secret' to be kept in En Gedi. At Susiya there were secret tunnels to facilitate a quick escape. I suggest that the cavity at Beth Alpha was a secret baptizing pond. In some places, like En Gedi and Rehov, The structures had burned down. It is possible that the Romans discovered that their temples were being used for non-pagan worship and thus set fire to them. In Megiddo, the floor with it Christian inscription was cover with earth.

One group that may have converted such temples into its own needs was a sect of gentile Christians which adopted Jewish customs and was known as the Ebionites. That may explain the abundance of Jewish symbols in these buildings, a fact that led archaeologists to define them as ancient synagogues.

In his *Against the Jews*, eight sermons delivered in Antioch in the 380s, John Chrysostom rebuked Christians who had “Judaized,” which meant veneration of the synagogues and the festivals of the Jews (Cohen 1987: 166). Obviously there were enough such Christians to deserve eight sermons.

One site that may illustrate this possibility is the so-called synagogue at Isfiya, discovered in 1930. The remains indeed include inscriptions in Hebrew such as ‘Peace upon Israel’ and Jewish symbols like a *menorah* (candlestick), which led the archaeologists who studied the site to define the place as a synagogue. However, there are several peculiar details. Avi-Yonah and Makhoully (1933: 124) wrote:

What remains is the head of one peacock and the head and neck of the other. They can be identified by the grayish tesserae of their heads, the green (glass) tesserae of the neck and the characteristic three feathers on their heads. The appearance of this type of panel in a synagogue pavement is rather surprising. Its occurrence has hitherto been limited to church pavements.

The authors remarked (p. 131) that “We are unfortunately unable as yet to identify the name of the village of which this was the place of worship.” They also noted that the building, like the el-Hamme synagogue, “seems to have perished in flames.” They suggested that the destruction may have been due to some riot connected with the anti-Jewish policy of Justinian. It is usually assumed that the mosaic of Beth Alpha was made during the reign of the Emperor Justin I (518-527). This interpretation follows the Aramaic inscription found there.

Since several of the edifices were built on grand scale, archaeologists have concluded that the Jewish population of that era must have been affluent. However, fancy and expensive monuments are not necessarily a sign that the general population is prosperous or that the land is well-off. For example, The King Hassan II Mosque in Casablanca, completed in 1993, is one of the largest mosques in the world, by some accounts the 5th. Nevertheless, Morocco is hardly a rich country.

I suggest that the terms Christian-Jews or Jewish-Christians are misleading. A Jew who has converted to Christianity is, for all practical matters, a Christian. And a Christian who put a *kippa* upon his head, stop working on *Sabbath*, and eats only glatt kosher is still a Christian. According to

Taylor (1993: 21) “after Justin, Jewish-Christian, defined as groups of Christian Jews and their converts who upheld the Mosaic customs, are no longer found in surviving literature as being accepted within the catholic Church.” It seems that term Jewish-Christian is a modern scholarly invention created to define early Christians who held certain notions. In a sense, since Christianity has its roots in Judaism, all Christians can be considered to be Jewish-Christians For sake of clarity we should examine to what ideas the adjective 'Jewish-Christian' was added.

The first was the dispute about the nature of Jesus. Irenaeus wrote (Bagatti 1971: 32) that “the Ebionites also teach that the world was made by God, but regarding the Lord (Jesus Christ) they believe as Cerinthus and Carpocrates do. They use only the *Gospel of Matthew* and they reject the apostle Paul as a rebel against the Law.” Bagatti wrote (p. 103) that “for the Jews Jesus was an imposter; the Judaeo-Christians saw him as the promised Messiah.” I suggest that most educated Jews would disagree with Bagatti's definition concerning how they see Jesus. In any case, the idea that Jesus was the Messiah is not a Jewish one.

The second was the date of celebrating Easter. Bagatti wrote (1971: 10):

A half a century after Hadrian's war we meet in the community an open dispute between the Hellenistic hierarchy and the Judaeo-Christian faithful, especially under the bishop Narcissus and his successor Alexander. The first was present at the Council of Caesarea (196), at which it was established that Easter should be celebrated on Sunday instead of the 14<sup>th</sup> of Nisan, and it can be supposed that when the bishop wished to implement the decision of the Council, he met with opposition. In fact the Judaeo-Christians were convinced that the traditional day of Nisan the 14<sup>th</sup> was not capable of change.

Jews have always celebrated Pesach on the 15<sup>th</sup> of Nisan. In fact, there was a great debate among early Christians whether Easter should be celebrated on Nisan 14<sup>th</sup> or 15<sup>th</sup>. I maintain that the source of the idea of celebrating Easter on the 14<sup>th</sup> of Nisan is a reading of *1 Enoch* (see Landau 2005). However this was an internal Christian dispute, the proponents of the dissenting view had nothing to do with the Jews themselves.

The third idea was millenarianism. St. Jerome rails against the Ebionites principally on account of millenarianism (Bagatti 1971: 90). Looking for references of “Jewish millenarianism” with the help of an Internet searching engine produced several entries and they all alluded to a much later era and

also in a sense of messianism. However, by definition millenarianism is based on a one-thousand-year cycle and is a Christian term and in this sense it has no relation to any Jewish doctrine or belief.

Another observation related by Bagatti (1971: 46) concern the Enochite literature:

The *Book of the Secrets of Enoch*, preserved in a Slavic tongue, speaks of the angels and of the doctrine of seven heavens. Today it is considered a Judaeo-Christian work, rather than a Jewish book retouched.”

The *Book of Enoch* was rejected by the Church Father around the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries. The Jews had rejected it several centuries earlier.

Another interesting observation made by Bagatti (1971: 86) concerns the 4<sup>th</sup> century when Christianity had already won over paganism.

The Jewish usages and doctrines, unknown in great part to the Christian world, in some regions were looked upon as causes of division among the faithful and were therefore fiercely opposed...The stand, immediately after the peace, was made at the council of Nicea, held in 325, which was attended by 318 bishops. Its main target was the Arian doctrine regarding the person of Christ, largely taken from the Ebionite doctrine.”

Bagatti tells us (p. 90) that

the Jewish roots of these deviations was very clear to the minds of the defenders in the council of Nicaea, as we gather from St. Athanasius who accused Paul of having a Jew as patron, namely, Zenobia, who for his doctrine merited to be called “disciple of the Jews” and of the Arians he says that “all their stupid doctrine was Jewish.”

In other words, the Ebionites were actually what was later known as Arians, that is, heretics.

Obviously, my theory does not imply that there were no Jewish synagogues in the Land of Israel in antiquity; according to the Talmud, Tiberias boasted of thirteen synagogues. It indicates only that the Jewish inhabitants of the Land of Israel, also of that time, had followed, as expected, the biblical commandments and avoided decorating their synagogues with mosaics depicting Greek gods, human beings, animals, flowers, geometric patterns, etc. Their synagogues were, no doubt, simple

and unassuming, not very different from the houses surrounding them. Archaeologists do indeed have difficulties in determining the location of such synagogues. To make a long story short, I maintain that the classification of the edifices mentioned above as ancient Jewish synagogues is an archaeologists' misconception.

My study of the direction of these buildings is far from exhaustive. Not only do I lack data on the direction of several synagogues, but I should also check churches, monasteries and mosques built upon ancient foundations, as some clues may be found in those structures too. Actually, we should also look at the areas outside the Land of Israel. For example the walls of the synagogue at Dura Europos feature, among other things, a complete pagan temple, Orpheus wearing a Phrygian cap and playing a harp above the Tora Ark, etc.

One method to date those ancient structures has been according to their architectural features. I suggest another method, namely their exact orientations. Ilan (1991: 9) examined hundreds of sites and suggested that most likely 250 of them were synagogues. I suggest that the orientation of all those ancient remains be measured with accurate surveying tools.

## 7. Conclusions

The orientation of buildings towards other buildings or sites is an abstract matter which is not observed unless measured. In this paper I present data that can be practically checked. If indeed my measurements are correct, there must have been a reason for this kind of a precise planning. I suggest that many of those structures were Roman temples erected during the reign of Maximinus Daia at the beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> century C.E.

## Notes

1. <http://people.ucalgary.ca/~vandersp/Courses/texts/eusebius/eusempaf.html>
2. <http://www.bombaxo.com/trypho.html>

I thank Arieh Rochman-Halperin of the Israel Antiquities Authority Archives for his help in retrieving and labeling the information from the excavation files.

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