

Ancient Synagogues in the Land of Israel

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In late 2010 newspapers in Finland announced that a new ancient synagogue was discovered at Horvat Kur, a site situated on a hill several kilometers off the north-west shore of the Sea of Galilee. Since then the excavations have continued every summer. The faculty of Theology at Helsinki University is involved in the project and Finnish students take part in the excavation. In their latest report¹ the excavators write that they plan to conduct an analysis and interpretation on the 2012 material. They also plan to run another full season in 2013 to clarify the chronology of the building by cutting a number of well-placed soundings through the floor and along walls. This will help to clarify the final limiting point in time for the Byzantine synagogue. It will also help to determine whether there might have been earlier remains underneath it.

How do the archaeologists know that these are indeed remains of an ancient synagogue? Well, they cannot really know for sure. Had they found there an aron hakodesh and several Tora scrolls, or chairs with plates with Jewish names on them, then they could have claimed with certainty that the remains are definitely of a Jewish synagogue. Otherwise, they must employ judgment based upon various criteria.

There might have been a different opinion. Victor Guérin (1821-1891) a French intellectual, explorer and amateur archaeologist, who visited the Land of Israel 8 times between 1852 and 1888, toured also Horvat kur, which he called Kharbet Kefr Kouk:

...ils proviennent probablement d'un édifice tourné de l'ouest à l'est, dont il subsiste près de là de faibles vestiges, et qui, à cause de son orientation, me paraît avoir été une ancienne église chrétienne. (Description Géographique Historique et Archéologique de la Palestine, 1880, Vol. 6, p. 223.)

[...it has probably been an edifice directed from west to east, with small vestiges, which, because of their orientation, appear to me to be those of an ancient Christian church.]

Guérin's descriptions of his explorations were published in French in seven volumes between 1869-80. The volumes were translated into Hebrew and published in 1987. See also: Zvi Ilan, *Ancient Synagogues in Israel*, 1991, p. 132.

In fall 1950 the members of the Jewish community in Tampere bought an apartment in Savilinnantie 3-5 to serve as a community center. The apartment was quite small, so in the next year a bigger apartment in Satamakatu 7 was bought instead. Ten years later there were not as many members as before so it was sold and a smaller apartment in Näsilinnankatu 17 was purchased. One of the rooms in those apartments served as a synagogue. In the 1980th most members moved away from Tampere, so the center was closed and the apartment sold (Pirkkoliisa Uusihaaro. 1992. *Tampereen juutalainen seurakunta 1946-1981*).

According to Jewish tradition, it is required that at least ten men, a minyan, are present at a service, so the only requirement for place to be fit as a synagogue is that at least ten men can comfortably pray there together. In this sense, the building at Horvat Kur indeed could have served as a Jewish synagogue.

There is no reason to believe that in antiquity the requirements for a synagogue were different. According to the Talmud, in Tiberias there were 17 synagogues. Archaeologists have, in their opinion, identified two of them. When archaeologists discover an ancient possibly public building they check its direction. If it's built on east-west axis, it was probably a church. If it oriented towards Mount Gerizim, it must have been a Samaritan synagogue. Otherwise it was probably a Jewish synagogue.

While making preparation for building a dwelling house in Beth Shean, an ancient mosaic floor was unearthed. In 1964 Archaeologists conducted excavations and concluded that in the Byzantine era this was a synagogue. Nowadays the place is known as the "House of Leontis." Since then the floor was removed and now it is in display in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem. In fact, this is the first display a visitor see when he or she enters the museum. Along the displayed mosaic the curator of the exhibition wrote:

The use of pagan figurative images and mythological stories to decorate a Jewish public building reflects the persistence of the Hellenistic culture in Beth Shean, even during periods in which most of its inhabitants were already Christian, Jewish, or Samaritans.

On this mosaic one can observe clearly a menorah, by all account a Jewish symbol.



A menorah in the Beth Leontis mosaic

So, there could be little doubt that indeed the House of Leontis was a dwelling place of a Jewish family and one of rooms served as a synagogue. Right?

Wrong, claims Professor Zeev Safrai from the department of Land of Israel Studies at Bar-Ilan University in Ramat Gan. In his article 'the house of Leontis 'Kaloubas' – a Judaeo-Christian? (2003) Safrai, argues that the place served a so-called Judaeo-

Christian sect known as the Ebionites. The article is, in my opinion, a revolutionary one. I asked Professor Safrai, who is currently working on a new Commentary, in 40 volumes, of the Mishna, whether anybody has challenged his conclusion, and he said none



Professor Zeev Safrai (right) and the author of this article

The term Judaeo-Christian is a scholarly invention and has lots of meanings, none of them generally accepted. There is a great debate among Jews who is a Jew, however everybody agrees that a Jew is someone Jews define as a Jew. Since no Jew will define the Ebionites a Jewish group, they were something else. I would define them as a non-Catholic sect.

The fact that the praying hall at Beth Leontis included Jewish symbols does not necessarily mean that this room served as a Jewish synagogue; it could have been, for example, a church; after all, Christianity has evolved from Judaism and used its books and possibly symbols. Several years ago we attended a fine folk-music festival at the village of Rääkkylä in eastern Finland. The closing concert took place in the 19th century built beautiful wooden church. On the south wall, just below the ceiling, there is a painting of a menorah.



A menorah in the church at Rääkkylä

One has to take into account that in antiquity not only Jews, Samaritans, or Christians lived in the Land of Israel. In his *Panarion*, the 4th century Bishop Epiphanius of Salamis described 80 religious sects, either organized groups or philosophies, from the time of Adam to the latter part of the 4th century, detailing their histories, and rebutting their beliefs. So, any ancient building found could have also belonged to one of those groups. I suggest that there are no magic formulas to determine the nature of any ancient structures found, and each site should be examined and defined separately.

At Rehov, in the Beth Shean valley, 5 km south of Scythopolis, Beth Shean, an halakhic inscription found on the mosaic quite similar to tannaitic and talmudic sources, mainly *Tosefta Shvi'it* and *Yerushalmi Demai*. According to the excavator, the synagogue was built in three phases: a fourth century CE basilical hall was destroyed by a fire and subsequently reconstructed in the fifth century CE when a bema was added, a new mosaic was laid, and the walls and pillars were coated with plaster and painted with numerous inscriptions. Later on, during the sixth or seventh century CE, a narthex was added and on its floor was laid the famous halakhic inscription. There could very little doubt that at least in one stage the place served as a synagogue.

In so-called ancient synagogue at Sepphoris there is mosaic with Jewish motives and inscription in Hebrew, but also a Greek gods and inscriptions in Greek. The building

oriented towards Pella, a known Christian center across the Jordan River. Why would Jews construct a building towards this site? I suggest the possibility that the place served as a praying hall to one of those non-Catholic sects Epiphanius of Salamis wrote about.

One more example is the so-called ancient synagogue at Meiron. The entrance is from the south, which means that people should have turned around after entering the building in order to pray properly. If this was indeed a synagogue why was it built in this manner? The builders spent great deal of time and effort hewing the rock and they could have built the entrance at the eastern or northern walls of the building.

According the archaeologists who excavated the place, in the center of the building a plastered pool, approximately 1,50m in width and a depth of 1.35m, was hewed in the stony floor. Who needs a pool in the center of a synagogue? Jews indeed practice ritual bathing, but that happens in a special designated mikveh, possibly near the synagogue, but never an open pool in the midst of the praying area. I suggest that the pool served for baptizing by whoever sect that used the site. The members of this sect were not necessarily those who constructed the original edifice. Presently, the pool is covered with earth and the visitor to the place cannot see it.



The author of this article stands upon the spot of the plastered pool

During its thousands years of history, the Jewish people has evolved into the People of the Book. To pray or study their books they did not necessarily need monumental buildings; in principle, a modest structure has always been sufficient.

1. http://www.kinneret-excavations.org/horvat_kur.html

Update (November 2013):

There is a slight difference between the Hebrew and English versions of the report in *Hadashot Arkheologiyot* vol. 125 (2013).

In Hebrew:

בהמשכו של הקיר הדרומי (W7191) של בית הכנסת מזרחה, כ-2 מ' בריבוע AF 30/31, הוא יצר פינה עם קיר (W7193), הנראה מתאים להיות הקיר המזרחי של בית הכנסת. אפשר אם כך להעריך את גודל המבנה: כ-11 מ' אורך, כ-16.5 מ' רוחב. עדות מהריבועים המרכזיים (29/30 AD), חוליית עמוד אולי באתרה בריבוע AE 30/31 ממזרח לקיר הבמה W7183 ועמוד מטויח נוסף שנפל (1.5 מ' אורך מינימלי) סמוך לו, תומכים בהנחה שבית הכנסת היה מבנה בזיליקלי למרות כיוונו המזרח.

שטח מטויח במרכז ריבוע AF 30/31 וקירות ניצבים לקיר W7193 ממזרח וממערב מעידים על פעילות בנייה אינטנסיבית בשטח. בקטע הצפוני דומה שקיר W7193 היה כפול וניכרה בו שכבת טיח בין שתי שורות האבנים, בליבת הקיר. כמו קיר W71134 שימש קיר W7193 כנראה קיר טרסה שסימן את הקצה המזרחי של רמת ח' כור.

http://www.hadashot-esi.org.il/report_detail.aspx?id=2230&mag_id=120

In English:

remains were found at deeper levels than in the other western squares. The southern synagogue wall continued for c. 2 m into Sq AF 30/31 (W7191), and created a corner with a perpendicular wall (W7193), which seems to be the best option for the eastern exterior wall. Hence, the size of the synagogue can be estimated on the basis of this evidence to be c. 11 m long and c. 16.5 m wide. Together with the evidence in the central squares (AD 29/30), a possibly *in situ* column drum in Sq AE 30/31 east of bema wall W7183 and another fallen, plastered column (min. length 1.5 m) next to it, support the assumption that the synagogue, despite its broad layout, was a basilica-type structure. ~~_____~~

Apart from W7193, which may possibly be the eastern wall of the synagogue, the situation in Sq AF 30/31 still remains quite unclear at present. A plastered area in the center of the square and walls perpendicular to W7193 from east and west indicate intensive building activity in this area. At least in its northern part, W7193 seems to have been built as a double wall, showing a layer of plaster between two lines of stones in the core of the wall. Wall 7193, just like W7114, very likely served as a terrace wall, delineating also the eastern end of the Horbat Kur plateau.

http://www.hadashot-esi.org.il/Report_Detail_Eng.aspx?id=2230&mag_id=120

In the Hebrew version it is written “despite its strange orientation.” In the English version this comments is missing. Assuming that none of the authors of this report knows Hebrew enough to write this report, one may assume that an omission has occurred in the process of translating this report from the original Hebrew into English.

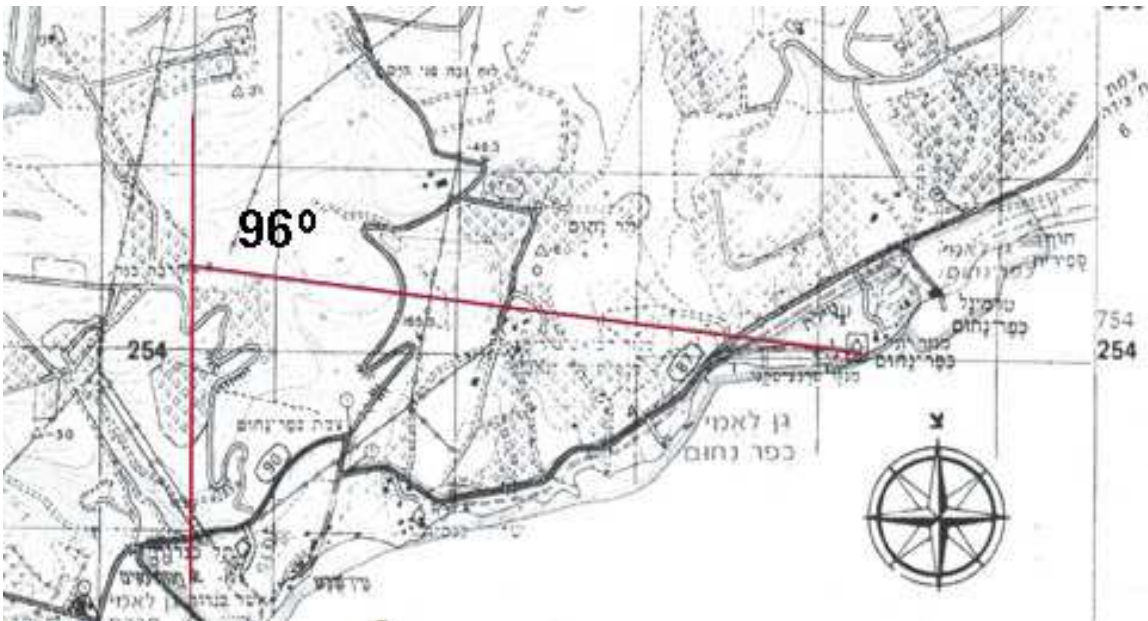
Update (November 11, 2013):

Victor Guérin thought the site was an ancient church since it oriented eastwards (see above). However, examining the map and a photo released by the team who currently excavates the site, the direction is not exactly east, but diverts 6 degrees to the south.



Horvat Kur

It may mean that the structure was not a Catholic church but rather a praying hall of a non-Catholic sect. The building oriented towards Capernaum.



The orientation of Horvat Kur

Update (November 30, 2013):

My guess is that Capernaum cannot be seen from Horvat Kur.

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/98856512@N04/9501166005/in/pool-horvatkur2013>

<http://www.flickr.com/groups/horvatkur2013/>

So, if the orientation indeed was towards Capernaum, the builders had had to use surveyors. My outrageous suggestions can be easily checked.

Update (December 9, 2014):

In a video describing a visit at Horvat Kur, posted in YouTube on January 1, 2013:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Ufut3fi9Lw>

Dr. Byron R. McCane, one of the excavators, presents a cavity under the supposedly bema, and suggests it served as a geniza and a treasury, as several coins were found there.



The cavity at Horvat Kur

In a report published later that year, the excavators wrote that “a large threshold stone on the east side of the *bemah* shows that the space beneath the platform was used for some kind of storage even though it still requires further study to see how high the platform originally was” (Zangenberg et al. 2013: 571). A more definite description of the content of the storage space appears in the abstract at the beginning of the article (p. 557): “The most important finds include an elevated platform (i. e., a *bemah*) that

supported a chest holding Torah scrolls...” I assume they do not mean an underground aron hakodesh.

As I see it, steps are leading down and there is enough room for a person to stand and possibly sit. I suggest that this cavity, like the one at Beth Alpha, served as a baptizing pond. Adjacent the structure a big cistern was discovered, as well as remains of three pools. One ancient sect that practiced intensely baptism was the Elcesaites, Elkasaites, Elkesaites, or Elchasaites. I suggest the possibility that the structure at Horvat Kur was one of their praying halls.

Zangenberg, Jürgen K., Münger, Stefan, Hakola, Raimo, McCane, Byron R. 2013. The Kinneret Regional Project Excavations of a Byzantine Synagogue at Horvat Kur, Galilee, 2010–2013: A Preliminary Report. Hebrew Bible and Ancient Israel. Volume 2, Number 4, 557-576.

Update (August 9, 2015):

In press releases published in Finland at the end of July 2015, there was a report about a mosaic with an inscription in Aramaic and a section of a menorah that was unearthed at Horvat Kur:

<http://blogs.helsinki.fi/sacredtexts/2015/07/31/ancient-synagogue-mosaic-floor-showing-menorah-found-at-horvat-kur-israel/> (CSTT)

<http://www.hs.fi/kulttuuri/a1305973917981>

The inscription reads: ‘Eleazar bar Yudan bar Suso’

Typing the Hebrew letters of the name into Google, it was revealed that the sons of Eleazar bar Yudan, were involved in the construction of the so-called ancient synagogue at Bar’am. If the man Eleazar bar Yudan is the same in both inscriptions, it may mean that the structure at Horvat Kur was built before the one at Bar’am.

In the blog published by CSTT team (see above) it is written:

Unfortunately the menorah is not fully preserved, because a column base was later cut directly through the mosaic when the synagogue underwent renovations.

That raises the possibility that the place might have been at first a Jewish synagogue, but later converted into another public house by people who did not care much about the mosaic.