THE SEPPHORIS SYNAGOGUE
Deciphering an Ancient Message through Its Archaeological and Socio-Historical Contexts

Zeev Weiss
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The Sepphoris Synagogue: Deciphering an Ancient Message through Its Archaeological and Socio-Historical Contexts

by Zeev Weiss

(with contributions by Ehud Netzer, Katia Cytryn-Silverman, Leah Di Segni, Orna Eliahu-Oron, Judit Gärtner, Yael Gorin-Rosen, and Ya'akov Meshorer)

Sepphoris was a major urban center in the Lower Galilee in the Roman and Byzantine periods. Architecturally, artistically, and culturally, it was not very different from the pagan cities of ancient Palestine, and its exposure to and assimilation of Greco-Roman culture did not hinder Jewish life. Like other major cities with Jewish, pagan, and Christian populations, Sepphoris boasted residential areas interspersed with public buildings.

In 1993, the expedition team of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem unearthed one such public edifice—a complete synagogue dated to the early fifth century CE. The synagogue was graced with a richly colored mosaic floor featuring a plethora of Jewish symbols, biblical scenes, and dedicatory inscriptions in Aramaic and Greek. This mosaic and other synagogue remains are considered among the most important and exciting finds in Jewish art since the discovery of the Dura Europos synagogue in Syria seventy years ago.

The present volume is the final excavation report of the Sepphoris synagogue. This comprehensive and multifaceted study presents a full description and thorough analysis of the archaeological data (architecture, mosaics, epigraphy, and small finds) as well as an extensive discussion of the evidence in its socio-historical context. The author maintains that the message in the central mosaic carpet of the prayer hall focuses on the main themes characterizing the Judaeo-Christian controversy at the time and, via the mosaic's illustrative biblical motifs, serves as a response in which the Jews claim that they are the Chosen People.

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