

A Mosaic of the Book of Daniel in the Ya'amun Church

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THE YA'AMUN CHURCH in northern Jordan, a three-aisled basilica of the late fifth-early sixth century,¹ has preserved in its decoration a depiction of the story of Daniel. In the north aisle of the church is a mosaic 5.00 meters high and 17.50 meters wide. It is composed of four panels. The first features plant motifs, though along the borders are geometric motifs (multiple swastika-meanders).² The remaining panels show geometric patterns, such as shaded multi-strands and intersecting circle motifs, though also again including multiple swastika-meanders. The panels have quite original outer borders, consisting of multiple swastika-meanders and spaced recessed-returned swastikas containing a square within each space. Additionally, each square includes several motifs, such as knots and waves of interlaced circles.

The Ya'amun mosaicists were true masters of their profession. They combined motifs with a long tradition, some going back to the Roman imperial age; at the same time, newly created designs appear here for the first time. This study is particularly concerned with the human shapes and representational features in the north aisle (*fig. 1*). This panel consists of three parts, each representing a scene from the Bible.

¹ For description and plan see Nizar Turshan, "The Magi: a Rare Mosaic Floor in the Ya'amun Church (Jordan)," *GRBS* 50 (2010) 616–624.

² M. Nassar, "Catalogue of Geometric Mosaic Pavements of Jordan during the Byzantine Period" (unpublished, n.d.) *fig. 7: 3.6*.

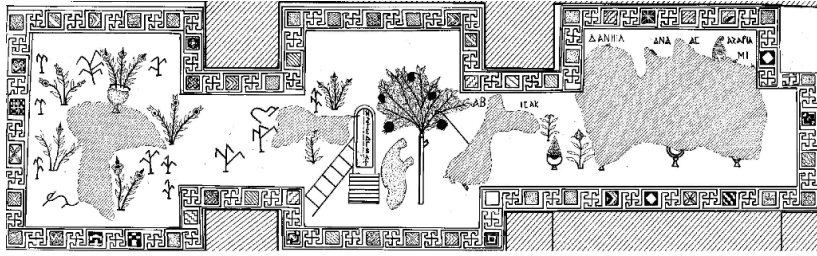


Fig. 1: Ya'amun church, north aisle



Fig. 2: North aisle mosaic, the Delta

1. *The Nilotic scenes*

(a) *Flora of the Delta*. Elements of the Old Testament can be recognized in the first part of the panel (*fig. 2*), where we see, representing the Nile Delta, small plants, flowers, and fruit such as have always flourished on the both sides of Nile. Unfortunately, part of the scene is damaged, from an iconoclastic episode, so it is extremely difficult to recognize some of the original shapes. Nonetheless, we can assume that the mosaic contained animal and/or human figures, even if it is not possible now to recognize them. The plants are very small, and on some parts are growths that appear spiky, like grass; such flora are usually found near water, and thus it can be assumed that it is the Nile that is depicted. We also find some lotus flowers and some fruit, such as pomegranates.

In a Nilotic scene at another Jordanian site, the church at Umm al-Manabi, are depicted a boat, a fish, and several architectural elements.³ Scenes of the Delta also appear in Jordan in the mosaic floor of the Church of St. Stephen at Umm al-Rasas (eighth century), though there the scenes are of Egyptian cities in the Delta—Alexandria, Kasion, Thenesos, Tamiathis, Panaou, Pelusium, Antinoe, Herakleopolis Parva, Cynopolis, and Pseudostomon.⁴ Interestingly, these cities in the Delta are recorded on the map on the floor of the church at Madaba (mid sixth century).⁵ A Nilotic motif is also on the floor in the intercolumnar space of the Church of Sts. Lot and Procopius at Nebo (557);⁶ there we find a fish, some architectural features, a fisherman, and a boatman. There is also a view of the city of Alexandria at Gerasa on the floor of the

³ A. Augustinovich and B. Bagatti, “Escursioni nei dintorni di Ajlun,” *Liber Annuus* 2 (1952) 227–314; M. Piccirillo, *The Mosaics of Jordan* (Amman 1993) 341, fig. 752.

⁴ Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 36, 238, pls. 354–358; K. Dunbabin, *Mosaics of the Greek and Roman World* (Cambridge 1999) 266, 267, fig. 282.

⁵ Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 27, 28, 81–95, pl. 74.

⁶ Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 37, 164–165, pl. 209.

church of St. John (531).⁷ Nilotic motifs occur at another location in Jordan, in the nave of the church of Zay al-Gharby (Byzantine period);⁸ there are depicted two sailboats with two men aboard, fish, and aquatic birds. Another example of a Nilotic scene is in the Church of the Multiplication at et-Tabgha (second half of the fifth century);⁹ there we see plants similar to those in the Ya'amun church, but also buildings and animals. Additionally, there is an example from Osrhoene (sixth century), now in the Aleppo museum.¹⁰ Earlier Nilotic scenes are known from the Roman period, for example on the floor of the House of Menander at Pompeii of Augustan date.¹¹

(b) *The Nilometer*. The second part of the story (*fig. 3*) features elements that enlarge on the first part; the most important are the Nilometer¹² and the pomegranate tree. The Nilometer scene consists of a ladder, a niche containing the Greek letters from iota-alpha to iota-eta to indicate the height of the Nile flood, and at the base of the niche eight descending steps. Near the deep last step is a fish, unfortunately damaged by iconoclasm, its head pointing down towards the bottom of the river. The letters on the Nilometer are numerical, I–IH = 10–18. A Nilometer image has been found at another site in Jordan, in the central mosaic panel of the Umm al-Manabi church (Ajlun, Byzantine period). It is very similar to the Nilometer in the Ya'amun church and also features the same numbers, IA–IH; there however the Nilometer takes the form of a column.¹³

⁷ Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 288, pl. 504.

⁸ Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* pl. 660.

⁹ Dunbabin, *Mosaics* 194, fig. 207.

¹⁰ Dunbabin, *Mosaics* 184, fig. 198.

¹¹ R. Ling, *Ancient Mosaics* (London 1998) 35, fig. 21.

¹² Used to measure the height of the annual flood of the Nile: described by Strabo 17.1.48. Diodorus Siculus visited Egypt in the first century B.C. and in his description of the Nile flood mentions the Nilometer (1.36.7–12).

¹³ Augustinovich and Bagatti, *Liber Annuus* 2 (1952) 227–314; Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 341, fig. 752.



Fig. 3: North aisle mosaic, the Nilometer

A Nilometer using the same numerical system is found elsewhere in the same era, at the 'House of Leontis' in Beit Shean (Beisan), which may have functioned as a synagogue (fifth-sixth centuries); there, however, we find fewer numbers on the Nilometer than at the Ya'amun church (IA–IZ = 11–17).¹⁴ A Nilometer is portrayed on the floor of the et-Tabgh church (second half of the fifth century).¹⁵ Another example

¹⁴ N. Zori, *IEJ* 16 (1966) 123–134.

¹⁵ A. M. Schneider, *The Church of the Multiplication of the Loaves and Fishes*

from the area is in the Nile Festival Building at Sepphoris, on the floor mosaic in Room 6 (fourth-fifth century).¹⁶ An early representation of a Nilometer is in the Palestrina mosaic (last quarter of the second century B.C.).¹⁷

(c) *The Pomegranate tree.* The tree motif features a pomegranate tree, with green leaves, a straight trunk, and five pomegranate fruits (*fig. 4*). This may be meant to symbolize the five books of the Torah, Genesis-Exodus-Leviticus-Numbers-Deuteronomy. Some other shapes surrounding the tree were unfortunately damaged; there is what appears to be a kind of stick adjacent to the tree, possibly Moses' staff, collecting the five fruits. This might signify his traditional authorship of the five books.

In general, pomegranates symbolize blessings in the Bible. We find pomegranate trees in some churches in Jordan, for example the Church of the Apostles at Madaba (578).¹⁸ They also occur on the floor of the New Baptistery chapel at Mt. Nebo (597).¹⁹ The mosaic on the floor of the Church of the

(London 1937) 52–80; S. Loffreda, “Sondaggio nella Chiesa della Moltiplicazione dei Pani a Tabgha,” *Liber Annuus* 20 (1970) 370–380; Dunbabin, *Mosaics* 194, *fig. 207*.

¹⁶ Z. Weiss and R. Talgam, “The Nile Festival Building and its Mosaics: Mythological Representations in Early Byzantine Sepphoris,” in J. H. Humphrey (ed.), *The Roman and Byzantine Near East III* (*JRA* Suppl. 49 [2002]) 55–90, at 80.

¹⁷ P. Meyboom, *The Nile Mosaic of Palestrina, Early Evidence of Egyptian Religion in Italy* (Leiden 1995) 27, 30, *figs. 6, 15*; Ling, *Antient Mosaics* 32; Dunbabin, *Mosaics* 50, *fig. 47*

¹⁸ U. Lux, “Die Apostel-Kirche in Madba,” *ZDPV* 106 (1966) 64–129, at 109–126; Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 106, *pls. 80, 81, 92*

¹⁹ S. J. Saller, *The Memorial of Moses on Mount Nebo* (Jerusalem 1941) I 230, II *pl. 106.1*; V. Corbo, “Nuovi scavi archeologici nella cappella del Battistero della Basilica del Nebo (Siyagha),” *Liber Annuus* 17 (1967) 241–258; M. Piccirillo, “Campagna archeologica nella Basilica di Mosé Profeta sul Monte Nebo-Siyagha,” *Liber Annuus* 26 (1976) 281–318, and *Mosaics of Jordan* 150, *pl. 197*.



Fig. 4: North aisle mosaic, the pomegranate tree

Acropolis at Ma'in (dated 719/20) is decorated with pomegranate trees,²⁰ as is the church of Bishop Sergius at Umm al-

²⁰ R. de Vaux, "Une mosaïque byzantine à Ma'in (Transjordanie)," *RBibl* 47 (1938) 227–258; M. Piccirillo, "Le antichità bizantine di Ma'in e dintorni," *Liber Annuus* 35 (1985) 339–364.



Fig. 5: Daniel and his brothers

Rasas (587/8).²¹ Two other examples of pomegranate trees are at Umm al-Rasas, one in the Church of the Lions (late sixth century)²² and one in the Church of St. Stephen (756).²³

2. *Daniel's story*

The most important part of the new mosaic tells Daniel's story, after the Book of Daniel (*fig. 5*). Four names are visible: Daniel, Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael (*figs. 6–9*). The four brothers were part of the Babylonian captivity during the reign of Nebuchadnezzar.

²¹ M. Piccirillo, "Le iscrizioni di Um er-Rasas – Katron Mefaa," *Liber Annuus* 37 (1987) 177–239, and "Umm er-Rasas – Kastron Mefaa quarta campagna," *Liber Annuus* 39 (1989) 266–268.

²² M. Piccirillo, *Liber Annuus* 39 (1989) 266–268.

²³ M. Piccirillo, *Madaba: le chiese e i mosaici* (Jerusalem/Milan 1989) 282–301.



Fig. 6: Daniel (ΔΑΝΙΗΛ)



Fig. 7: Hananiah (ΑΝΑΝΙΑΣ)



Fig. 8: Azariah (ΑΖΑΡΙΑ)



Fig. 9: Mishael (ΜΙ)

The faces and bodies have been completely destroyed, except for parts of their hats and half of the face of Azaria, which survives with the entirety of his hat. Under the four brothers, a kind of symbolic fire is very clear. The four names are written in Greek letters over the heads of the four brothers. The name of Michael was destroyed by iconoclasm: only two letters survive, ΜΙ, and the remains of Michael's hand.

Nebuchadnezzar burned them in a huge oven after they refused to pray to a statue that was made after Daniel explained his dream. The image corresponds to certain verses from the Book of Daniel: 1:6–7, 17; 2:1, 24–26, 31–46; 3:1–21. We do find the names on another floor mosaic in the area, the Hebrew inscription in the En Gedi synagogue (probably fifth century): but it names only Daniel's brothers Hananiah, Michael, and Azaria, the three traditional 'pillars of the world', and without images.²⁴ On the other hand, we can see Daniel,

²⁴ L. I. Levine, *Ancient Synagogues Revealed* (Jerusalem 1981) 140–145.

but in bronze, at the Umm al-Kundum Byzantine church at Salt in Jordan, where Daniel among the lions is depicted in a bronze relief.²⁵

3. *Conclusion*

The people of Byzantine Ya'amun were Christians. They designed their church on what was the usual model at the time and they chose from contemporary decorations. The people of Ya'amun were also believers in the Holy Book in general, so it is not surprising that they used stories from scripture. The mosaics of the south aisle feature another story, from the New Testament: the Magi. The north panels tell the story of the Old Testament from when Moses left Egypt with the five books of the Torah, up through the time of Nebuchadnezzar, who took the Jews to Babylonia, as described in the Book of Daniel. The Ya'amun mosaicists tried to design their mosaics very literally, but in a symbolic way as well: thus, we find Daniel and his brothers named near each his face, and a symbolic fire under each of them. The two aisles in the church cite stories from the New and Old Testament; the people of Ya'amun believed in the Holy Book as a complete book. This is the first time that mosaic floors of the Byzantine period that span the story of the whole Bible, Old Testament and New, have been found in the Holy Land.

January, 2011

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²⁵ Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 316, fig. 657.