

In 1929 Eliezer L. Sukenik, father of Yigael Yadin, excavated a synagogue at the Jewish settlement of Beth Alpha on the eastern side of the Plain of Jezreel. The name of the ancient village is not known, so the synagogue is known by the name of the modern settlement. The synagogue was an impressive building, 85 feet by 55 feet, built of blocks of black basalt set in mortar. Interior colonnade divided the space of the prayer hall into a nave and two aisles. The prayer hall features an elaborate mosaic executed in a primitive artistic style. The mosaic is dated to the sixth century C.E., the date of the latest renovation of the synagogue and a date suggested by an Aramaic inscription in the floor: “[This mosaic] was laid in the year ... of the rule of Justin the King ... wheat one hundred ... they were willing all the sons of the town ... the sons] of Rabbi A ... [May they be remembered for] good all the sons ... Amen.” In the first panel at the entrance one sees what is called in Jewish tradition “the binding of Isaac,” taken from the incident in Genesis 22:1-19. The panel tells the whole story. At left two servants stand with a beast of burden. At right the altar blazes up, while Abraham (whose name appears in Hebrew above and to the left of his head) holds the knife in his right hand and Isaac (also labeled in Hebrew) in his left hand. In the center a ram stands tethered to a bush. The Hebrew above its head reads “And behold, a ram” (Genesis 22:13). Above the bush, the hand of the angel of the Lord emerges from a cloud and the command “Do not send forth [your hand]” (Genesis 22:12) appears below the hand.