

Inside the Huqoq Synagogue

Jodi Magness, Shua Kisilevitz,
Matthew Grey, Dennis Mizzi,
Karen Britt, and
Ra'anan Boustan

HUQOQ'S ANCIENT SYNAGOGUE has yielded magnificent mosaics—some of the most impressive in all of Israel. But it was not mosaics that initially brought me (Jodi Magness) to Huqoq in Israel's Lower Eastern Galilee. I never expected to make the spectacular discoveries described here.

After spending most of my career working in the southern part of the country, I began the excavations at Huqoq, in 2011, in search of answers to questions about synagogue chronology. These questions mainly concern the so-called Galilean type of synagogue buildings. In my opinion, archaeological finds such as coins and pottery indicate that these synagogues (exemplified by the one at Capernaum) date to the later fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries C.E., whereas traditionally they have been dated to the second and third centuries,

WILD WATERS. Bound for Tarshish, the boat carrying the prophet Jonah hits turbulent waters. After admitting he is to blame for the storm, Jonah instructs the sailors to throw him overboard to calm the waters. They do so hesitantly, and God sends a fish to swallow Jonah. This Biblical scene is captured on this mosaic from Huqoq's synagogue. At Huqoq, the fish that swallows Jonah is swallowed by a larger fish, which is in turn swallowed by an even larger fish. Hybrid women-bird creatures (Harpies and Sirens) appear in the mosaic's upper left quadrant, and the right side of the mosaic shows men fishing in a boat and wringing out a net.





GRIFFIN HIGHER PHOTOGRAPHY

HUQOQ'S SYNAGOGUE. With the Sea of Galilee in the background, the site of Huqoq sits atop a hill, some 4 miles from the lake. Huqoq's ancient synagogue appears in the center of this photo.

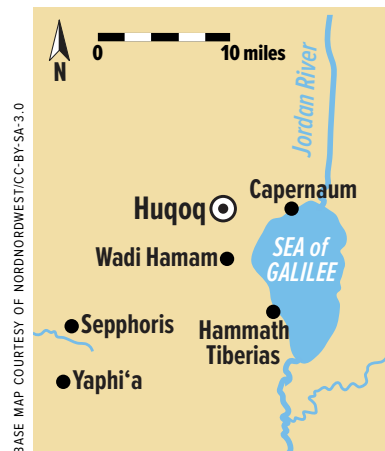
primarily on the basis of stylistic considerations (such as the style of architecture and carved stone decoration). The question of chronology has important historical consequences, as an earlier date would mean these synagogues were constructed when Jews lived in a predominantly pagan Roman environment. A later date, however, would mean they were built under Byzantine Christian rule, which many scholars think was oppressive to Jews. I was hoping that excavations at Huqoq would clarify which dating is correct.

I decided on Huqoq because it was a largely untouched site with promising signs of a Galilean-type synagogue. Although other archaeologists had documented scattered architectural fragments on the ground that seemed to belong to a Galilean-type synagogue, before our excavations no one knew if there really was a synagogue at Huqoq or where it was located.

Huqoq lies about 4 miles northwest of the Sea of Galilee on a

moderate hill surrounded by arable land. Joshua 19:34 mentions Huqoq as a village apportioned to the tribe of Naphtali after the Israelite conquest of Canaan. References in rabbinic sources, as well as several *mikva'ot* (ritual baths) at the site, indicate that Huqoq was a Jewish village in the Roman and Byzantine periods. By the Middle Ages and in the Ottoman period, it had become a Muslim village called Yakuk, which was abandoned during Israel's War of Independence in 1948.

SYNAGOGUE PLAN. Huqoq's early fifth-century C.E. synagogue consists of a rectangular basilica with a central nave surrounded by aisles, all of which were decorated with mosaics. It measures about 65 by 50 feet. Belonging to the Galilean type of synagogue, it was oriented to the south (toward Jerusalem) with the main entry in the center of its southern wall. A Torah shrine would have occupied the nave's south end. From north to south, the mosaic panels uncovered in the nave depict: Noah's ark, Pharaoh's soldiers in the Red Sea, a Helios-zodiac cycle, Jonah and the fish, and the Tower of Babel. From north to south, those in the east aisle comprise: the elephant panel, the commemorative panel, Samson and the foxes, and Samson with the Gaza gate.



BASE MAP COURTESY OF NORDNORDWEST/CC-BY-SA-3.0



GRIFFIN HIGHER PHOTOGRAPHY



GATE CHECK. Depicted as a giant with wavy reddish-brown hair (which is surprisingly short), Samson carries the gate of Gaza on his shoulders. This Biblical scene comes from Judges 16:3. The image above shows Samson's head and hands, as well as part of his left shoulder and arm. Another surviving portion of the same mosaic shows Samson's torso and two riders on horses—presumably pursuing him. Samson wears a white tunic, red cloak, and thick belt, which is similar to the attire of a fifth-century C.E. Roman soldier. Archaeologists uncovered this mosaic in the east aisle of Huqoq's synagogue.

Although we have excavated other remains of Huqoq—including the ancient village, the modern Ottoman village, and a significant medieval reuse of the synagogue—here we present only the synagogue and its mosaics discovered through the summer of 2017.¹

The synagogue is a typical example of the Galilean type: a basilica with the long walls on the east and west, the main entrance (or entrances) in the south wall (oriented toward Jerusalem), and a stylobate (raised foundation) for columns on pedestals that wrapped around the east, north, and west sides

of the interior, creating a central space (nave) surrounded by aisles. Two stone blocks laid end-to-end create a step rising from west to east on top of the mosaic floor (the Tower of Babel panel) at the south end of the nave. Perhaps these are the remains of a *bema* (platform) for the Torah Shrine. Altogether the building measures about 65 feet long and 50 feet wide.

So far there is no evidence of an earlier synagogue or an earlier floor under the mosaics. However, we found part of an earlier (undated) wall of different construction and orientation under the synagogue's north stylobate. Pottery and coins from the foundation trench of the east wall and radiocarbon dating of a charcoal sample from the bedding of the mosaic floor indicate that the synagogue was constructed in the early fifth century (shortly after 400 C.E.). It is unclear when or why it went out of use, as there are no signs of destruction by fire. At some point, the superstructure collapsed—perhaps due to an earthquake—but only after the building's abandonment. It appears that at least some of the fallen architectural pieces were later removed, most likely when the building was rebuilt and reused in the Middle Ages.

FIRE FOXES. To burn the Philistines' fields, Samson ties torches to pairs of foxes' tails and sets them loose. Found in the east aisle of Huqoq's synagogue, this scene comes from Judges 15:4–5. Its surviving portions show part of Samson's body and two pairs of foxes. Wearing a tunic with a circular medallion, belt, and red cloak, Samson appears as a giant dressed as a Roman soldier.

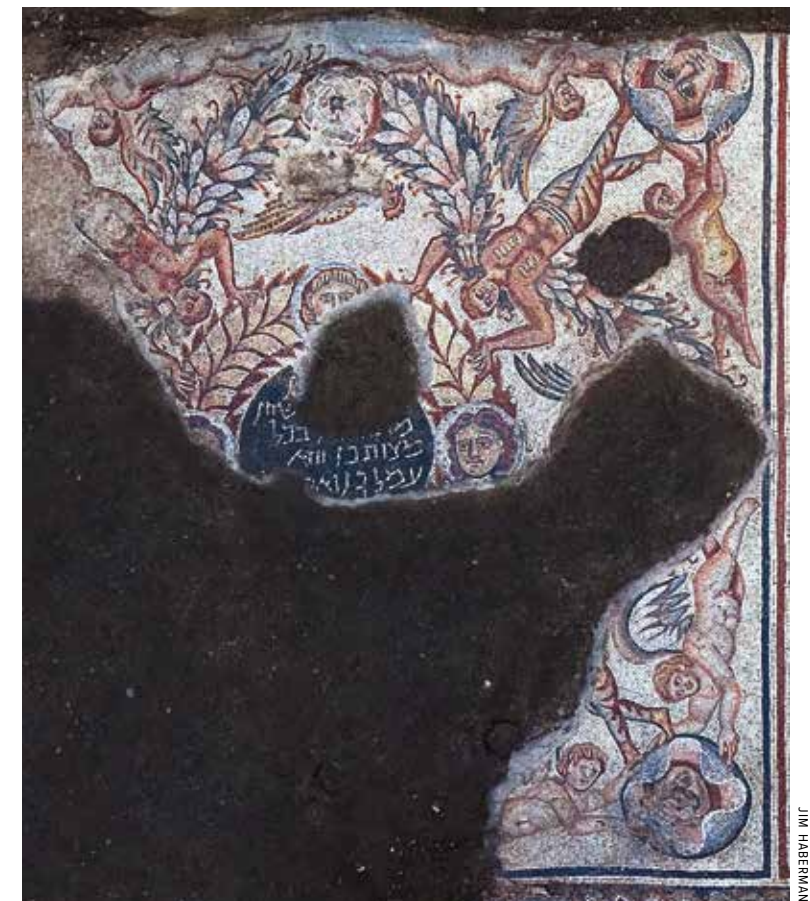
At that time, layers of leveling fill were dumped over the mosaics and collapse, to support the new floor about 3 feet above.

The nave and aisles of the synagogue are paved with mosaics decorated with figured scenes arranged in panels. In the following description, we begin with mosaics in the east aisle moving from south to north and then proceed from north to south in the nave.

The mosaic panel at the south end of the east aisle portrays an episode from Judges 16:3, in which Samson escapes from Gaza carrying the city gate on his shoulders after spending the night with a prostitute. The surviving portions of this scene, which is oriented toward the nave (east), include Samson's head, neck, hands, left shoulder, and torso, and the city gate, two horses, and two male figures. Samson is depicted with short, wavy, reddish-brown hair. Wearing a white tunic cinched by a thick belt and a red cloak, he holds the city gate on his shoulders with both hands. Horses and riders—perhaps Philistines—appear below and to the left of Samson.

Immediately to the north is another panel depicting the Biblical hero's exploits: the episode related in Judges 15:4–5, in which Samson takes revenge on the Philistines by taking 300 foxes, tying them together in pairs with lighted torches between their tails, and setting them loose to burn down the Philistines' agricultural fields. The surviving parts of the mosaic show Samson's torso, abdomen, and thighs, as well as two pairs of foxes. As described in Judges 15:4, the foxes are tied tail-to-tail with lighted torches, running in opposite directions. Samson wears a cream-colored tunic decorated with a circular medallion (an *orbiculum*) and a wide belt cinched at the waist. A red cloak falls in vertical

COMMEMORATING CONSTRUCTION. Located in the east aisle of Huqoq's synagogue, this mosaic contains a commemorative inscription inside a wreath, held aloft by four giants. Each giant stands on a sphere with a human face (or mask), supported by two winged cupids. Human heads appear in roundels arranged on the wreath around the Hebrew inscription, which commemorates the construction of the synagogue. Although its entirety is not preserved, the inscription likely celebrated the project's donors or those who upheld the Jewish commandments.



folds behind his tunic. In both Samson panels, the Biblical hero is depicted as a giant clothed in garments typical of Roman soldiers in the fourth and fifth centuries.²

To the north of the mosaic depicting Samson and the foxes lies a square panel with a Hebrew inscription encircled by a wreath that contains roundels with heads on three sides of the medallion: two female heads on the sides and a male head at the top, all looking inward to the inscription. Presumably a fourth roundel, with a male head (not preserved), was located below the inscription. In each corner of the panel, four male giants (*atlantes*) hold up the wreath. With exaggerated pectoral muscles and arms raised overhead to support the wreath, they wear tight-fitting trousers belted at the waist and soft boots. A continuous garland passes over the giants' shoulders, and they stand on spheres inscribed with human faces or masks held aloft by winged cupids (*putti*).

Although only partially preserved, the inscription likely commemorates the synagogue's construction by blessing those who adhere steadfastly to all the Jewish commandments (*mitzvot*) or, alternatively, those who made charitable donations to the project.* The panel's composition directs the viewer's attention to the medallion in the middle, emphasizing the inscription's centrality. The eastward orientation of this panel and the neighboring elephant panel suggests there was an entrance at this spot in the synagogue's east wall.

The elephant panel³ lies to the north of the commemorative panel. This extraordinary mosaic is divided into three registers (horizontal strips), apparently depicting a story that develops from the bottom up.

The bottom register appears to show the aftermath of a battle, including a dead bull and a dead elephant and his rider. The middle register depicts an arcade (series of arches) framing eight beardless young men grasping sheathed swords, flanking a ninth, seated male figure. They are clothed in elaborate white tunics and mantles decorated with the Greek letter *eta* (H)—a symbol of high status in the Roman world. Above each arch is a lighted oil lamp. A bearded, white-haired elderly male holding a scroll sits enthroned in the central arch.

The upper register depicts an encounter between two groups of men, each led by a male figure whose importance is indicated by his large size and central position. The members of each group halt and gaze expectantly at the dramatic meeting of their

*See David Amit, "Mosaic Inscription from a Synagogue at Horvat Huqoq," *Bible History Daily* (blog), January 2, 2013.



THE ELEPHANTS IN THE ROOM. The aftermath of a battle. A council. A meeting of leaders. These three connected scenes appear in a mosaic from the synagogue's east aisle at Huqoq. The bottom register shows men, elephants, and a bull killed in battle. In the middle register, eight young men—holding swords and dressed in white tunics with the Greek letter *eta* (H)—flank a white-haired man seated on a throne. These figures repeat in the top register, which shows the meeting of two leaders, both standing in front of their armies. This mosaic may depict the legendary meeting of the Jewish high priest and Alexander the Great, an episode from the Maccabean revolt, or the second-century B.C.E. Seleucid siege of Jerusalem and ensuing alliance between the Hasmonean ruler and high priest John Hyrcanus and the Seleucids. If one of these scenarios, this would be the first representation of a nonbiblical historic event on an ancient synagogue floor.

leaders. This is the focal point of the top register as well as the climax of the larger narrative depicted in the panel. The left-hand group originally consisted of eight young men holding swords led by a bearded, white-haired elderly male, all wearing white tunics and mantles—the same figures depicted in the middle register. The leader commands attention by pointing directly up at what, in the context of the scene, must be the sky overhead. He holds an object, perhaps a coin or sword in his left hand, which he offers to the opposing large figure.

The leader of the group on the right-hand side wears the dress and insignia of a king or emperor on a military campaign, namely, a cuirass (breastplate), purple *chlamys* (cloak), and diadem. With his right hand, the king gestures toward a bull whose horn he grasps with his left hand. A phalanx of armed soldiers and two battle elephants accompany him. The phalanx, battle elephants, and diadem identify the right-hand leader as a Greek king, not a Roman emperor. However, in keeping with Late Antique artistic conventions of “contemporization,” he is depicted in the garments of a contemporary emperor rather than those of an earlier Greek king, just as in the other panels where Samson is shown dressed like a Roman soldier.

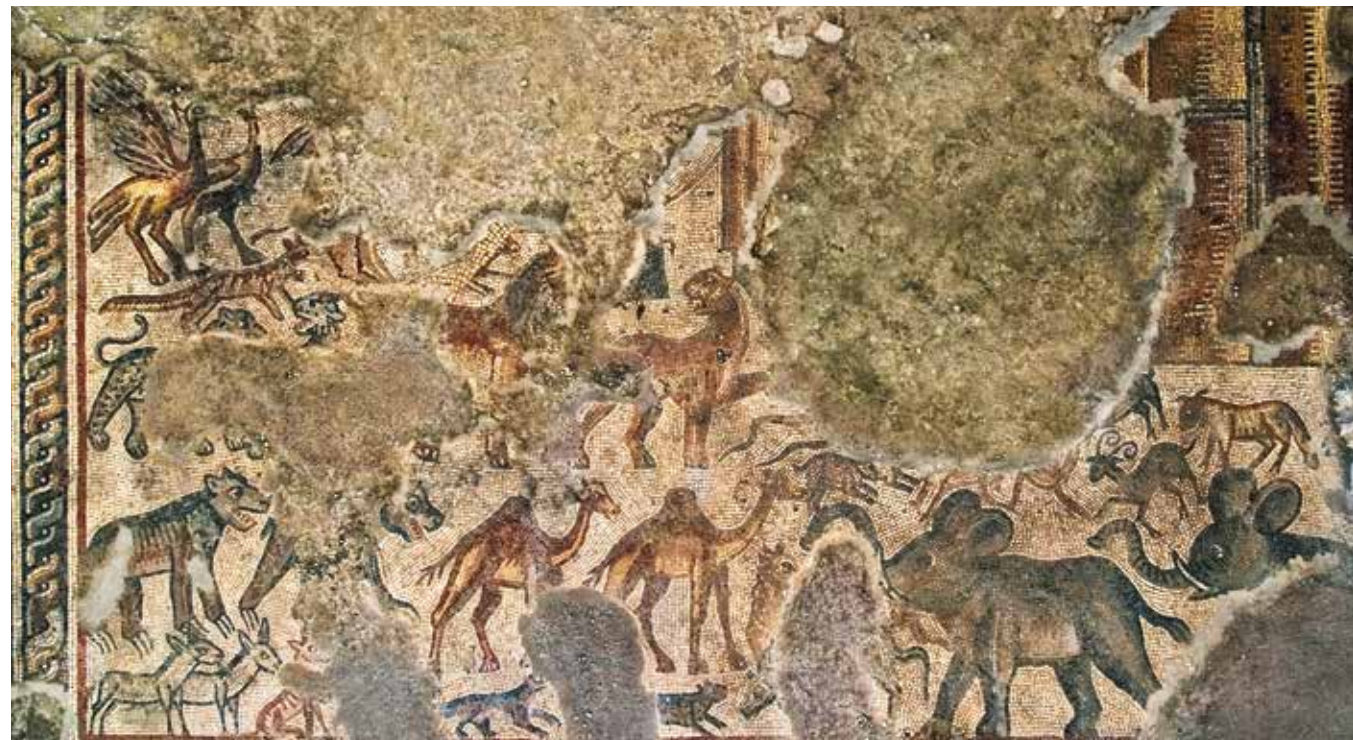
Although there are no inscriptions identifying the story represented in the elephant panel, the battle elephants and Greek king in the upper register set it

apart from other scenes in ancient synagogue art. In all other synagogues, narrative scenes always depict stories from the Hebrew Bible. In contrast, the elephant panel seems to portray a historical event, either real or invented, from the late Classical or Hellenistic periods (fourth–first centuries B.C.E.).

The Greek king is likely Alexander the Great or one of his successors. Possible interpretations of the story told in this panel include the depiction of a scriptural narrative, either from the Hebrew Bible or as retold elsewhere in Jewish or Christian traditions; events from the period of the Maccabean revolt, especially the Maccabean martyrdom traditions; the legendary meeting between Alexander the Great and the Jewish high priest; or the Seleucid siege of Jerusalem under Antiochus VII Sidetes and the subsequent military alliance between the Seleucids and the Hasmonean high priest John Hyrcanus.

The mosaics in the nave are oriented toward the south. After entering through a main door in the center of the synagogue’s south wall, a viewer would have seen them while looking toward the hall’s north

ANIMAL PARADE. Two by two, animals walk toward Noah’s ark, represented as a large wooden box on legs. The animals include ostriches, foxes, leopards, lions, snakes, sheep, bears, donkeys, camels, and elephants. Behind the ark sits a building with a red-tiled roof. Based on Genesis 6:11–7:10, the mosaic was found in the nave of Huqoq’s synagogue.



JIM HABERMAN



JIM HABERMAN

end. There is an elaborate border composed of rectangular panels depicting animal chase scenes alternating with squares of a geometric meander motif (or Greek key pattern) rendered to give the appearance of depth. Inside the border are five large panels depicting, from north to south, pairs of animals arrayed around Noah’s ark; Pharaoh’s soldiers drowning in the Red Sea; a Helios-zodiac cycle; Jonah being swallowed by a succession of three fish; and the building of the Tower of Babel. Smaller panels at the northern and southern ends of the nave contain lions, eagles, and an inscription enclosed by a wreath.

The northernmost large panel depicts Noah’s ark surrounded by pairs of animals arranged in rows facing the center (Genesis 6:11–7:10). The identifiable animals include donkeys, elephants, bears, camels, leopards, lions, snakes, sheep, foxes, and ostriches. The only surviving fragment of the ark is visible near the center, depicted as a wooden box on legs. To the right (east) of the ark is a partially preserved building with a red-tiled roof. The relationship between the ark and this building is unclear, as a later pit damaged the connecting section of mosaic.

The panel to the south of the Noah’s ark mosaic is an unusual depiction of the parting of the Red Sea (Exodus 14:1–15:21). The Egyptians, dressed like Roman soldiers, are shown tumbling from wheeled chariots pulled by teams of horses steered by a

SWALLOWED BY THE SEA. Pharaoh’s soldiers and horses drown as the parted waters of the Red Sea collapse around them and engulf their chariots. Based on Exodus 14:1–15:21 with some midrashic elaborations, the above mosaic shows fierce fish attacking the Egyptians, who wear the attire of Roman soldiers.

driver and being attacked or devoured by ferocious fish. The depiction recalls the archaic Song of the Sea (Exodus 15:1–19, 21), in which Pharaoh’s riders, horses, and chariots are cast into the sea. The human, fish, and animal figures are scattered across the panel in a chaotic arrangement that evokes the violent turmoil of the event. The predatory fish likely embody the sea’s power to consume the drowning soldiers—a midrashic element that embellishes the Biblical story.

The center of the synagogue nave is decorated with a large square panel containing a Helios-zodiac cycle—a motif found in eight other Late Antique Palestinian synagogues as well as in the fifth-century ‘Ein Gedi synagogue inscription. The Huqoq presentation differs from most other depictions. The usual arrangement of two concentric circles, with the inner circle containing Helios and the outer circle containing the zodiac signs, equally distributed in 12 wedge-shaped segments, has been replaced at Huqoq by interlacing roundels—an arrangement



JIM HABERMAN

CRACKED ZODIAC. In the center of Huqoq's synagogue lies a zodiac calendar. The various months are represented by a young man and zodiac sign within a roundel, such as the roundel for the month of *Tevet* with Capricorn shown as a hybrid fish-goat. The roundels with the 12 months encompass a central medallion, which shows the sun god Helios driving his chariot pulled by four white stallions across the sky. Although Helios himself has not been preserved, remnants of the horses and chariot, along with sun rays, stars, and a crescent moon, survive. In the mosaic's four corners, the four seasons—personified as winged young men—appear. Dressed like a manual laborer in a short tunic, the representation of Autumn (*Tishrei*) holds the horns of a gazelle, a grape cluster, and a shepherd's crook (see above).

paralleled only in the roughly contemporary Yaphi'a synagogue mosaic.

The Helios medallion at the center of the Huqoq mosaic preserves a crescent moon, stars, sun rays, and a four-wheeled chariot and four white stallions standing on a series of uneven horizontal gray and black lines. Damage to the Helios figure in the chariot makes it impossible to determine whether he was depicted as a personification of the Greco-Roman sun god (as in the mosaics at Hammath Tiberias, Beth Alpha, and Na'aran) or was represented aniconically, by a sun disk (as at Sepphoris). Fragmentary inscriptions, apparently in Hebrew, are visible

in panels encircling the Helios medallion.

Surrounding the medallion were 12 interlacing roundels containing the months and zodiac signs. The preserved months are personified as clean-shaven young men, each labeled in Hebrew and accompanied by the corresponding zodiac symbol. On the west side of the panel, the month *Tevet* is depicted with a sea-goat with a fish tail (Capricorn) behind him. The next roundel below (south) preserves only part of the name of the month *Kislev*. Below this is the figure of the month *Marheshvan* with a large scorpion (Scorpio) in front. The next roundel preserves the figure of *Tishrei* accompanied by a small human figure holding scales, a personification of Justice (Libra).

Personifications of the Seasons are depicted in the corners of the panel. *Tishrei* (Autumn), located in the southwest corner—the only fully preserved Season—is depicted as a winged male figure holding a bunch of grapes and crook in one hand and grasping the horns of a gazelle in the other, accompanied by two figs. He wears a short tunic typical of manual laborers. The depiction of a male Season in a synagogue is unparalleled; in other synagogues, the Seasons are female and usually not winged.

The panel to the south of the zodiac cycle presents the episode from the story of Jonah in which the

CONTINUED ON PAGE 38



CONSTRUCTION DELAYS. Located in the nave of Huqoq's synagogue, this mosaic shows the construction of the Tower of Babel, based on Genesis 11:1-9. People of various races quarry, transport, and lift stones with a pulley system; do woodworking; and build the tower—while some fight and others fall to their doom.

IMAGE BY JIM HABERMAN


continued from page 35

prophet, having fled aboard a ship from his divinely appointed mission of announcing the destruction of the city of Nineveh, is cast into the sea by his shipmates (Jonah 1:1–2:1). The scene is surrounded by numerous marine and maritime images, including vignettes drawn from daily life: a small fishing boat with a man casting a net on the right-hand (east) side and two men in loincloths wringing out a fishing net. Prominently represented in the center of the panel is a large sailing ship manned by five sailors, two of whom are climbing the mast. A bearded, partially balding, gray-haired man in the center of the ship—perhaps the captain—lowers a rope with a loop at the end. Immediately below the rope, Jonah's legs and feet can be seen dangling from the mouth of a large fish, which is being swallowed by two successively larger fish. The depiction of three fish swallowing Jonah is another example of a midrashic embellishment to the Biblical story.

In the sky to the left of the ship, three hybrid creatures, each with the thighs, torso, and head of a woman and the wings, rump, and feet of a bird, stand on a storm cloud. The trio is dancing and playing musical instruments (a flute and a lyre), attracting the attention of a sailor who points at them from the top of the ship's mast. The combination of their hybrid form, the storm cloud, and the musical performance leaves no doubt that these bird-women represent Harpies (Greek mythological personifications of the storm winds) and Sirens (as in Homer's *Odyssey*). Although the story of Jonah was popular in early Christian art, this is the first definite depiction of the narrative discovered in an ancient Jewish context.

The panel to the south of the Jonah scene shows the construction of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1–9) and God's punishment of the people for building a tower intended to reach to heaven. At the center of the scene, a square tower is under construction. Various aspects of the process, including the quarrying of stone, woodworking, and an elaborate pulley system, appear around the tower. The workmen are differentiated by hairstyles and facial hair, clothing, and even skin color in an attempt to portray different peoples. Amid the ongoing work, divine punishment for constructing the tower is represented by the deaths of some of the workmen, who are shown falling headlong from the scaffolding and the ropes of the pulley, as well as by a violent fight between workmen. The chaos and violence throughout the panel serve as graphic depictions of the punishment that God exacted from the builders for their act of hubris.

All these colorful, populated mosaics are certainly precious in their own right—as unique works of art and a testimony to ancient craftsmanship. But the historical significance of the Huqoq synagogue extends beyond the narrow confines of art history. The Huqoq excavations provide evidence of a rural Jewish community in Lower Eastern Galilee that constructed a monumental synagogue building paved with magnificent mosaics. Our discoveries contradict the impression conveyed by textual sources that Jews suffered under Byzantine Christian rule. Apparently at least some Galilean Jewish settlements flourished in the fifth and sixth centuries. The similarities between the Huqoq mosaics and those in the nearby synagogue at Khirbet Wadi Hamam—including depictions of Samson, Pharaoh's soldiers drowning in the Red Sea, and the building of the Tower of Babel—suggest that Jewish congregations in this part of Lower Eastern Galilee found these stories particularly meaningful.

At the same time, our discoveries raise a host of new questions, including how the Huqoq villagers could afford to construct such a large and richly decorated building, and when and why the synagogue was abandoned. Perhaps continuing excavations will provide some answers. In the meantime, the site of Huqoq is closed to the public. The mosaics have been removed for conservation, and the excavated areas are backfilled. Hopefully the site will be developed for tourism after our excavations are completed.⁴ 

¹ For interim reports, see Jodi Magness et al., “Huqoq (Lower Galilee) and Its Synagogue Mosaics: Preliminary Report on the Excavations of 2011–2013,” *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 27 (2014), pp. 327–355; Jodi Magness et al., “The Huqoq Excavation Project: 2014–2017 Interim Report,” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 380 (2018), pp. 61–131. Also visit the excavation's website at huqoq.web.unc.edu.

² For a discussion of Samson's significance, see Matthew J. Grey, “The Redeemer to Arise from the House of Dan: Samson, Apocalypticism, and Messianic Hopes in Late Antique Galilee,” *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 44 (2013), pp. 553–589.

³ See Karen Britt and Ra'anana Boustán, *The Elephant Mosaic Panel in the Synagogue at Huqoq: Official Publication and Initial Interpretations*, Supplementary Series 106 (Portsmouth, RI: Journal of Roman Archaeology, 2017).

⁴ The following institutions are consortium members of the Huqoq Excavation Project: the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; Austin College (TX); Baylor University; Brigham Young University; and the University of Toronto. We gratefully acknowledge the funding provided during the 2011–2017 excavation seasons by the consortium members; the Kenan Charitable Trust; the National Geographic Society Expeditions Council and Waitt Grants Program; the Loeb Classical Library Foundation; the Carolina Center for Jewish Studies; the International Catacomb Society; Dumbarton Oaks; the Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture; the Foundation for Biblical Archaeology; and numerous individual donors.