

WARRIOR WOMEN

Deborah and Yael Found at Huqoq

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UNLIKELY HEROES ARE COMMONPLACE in the Hebrew Bible. But the recent discovery of a mosaic from the synagogue at Huqoq that depicts the defeat of the Canaanite general Sisera under the leadership of the judge and prophet Deborah and his subsequent assassination by a woman named Yael (or Jael; Judges 4–5) is as stunning as it is unprecedented.

Since 2011, the Huqoq Excavation Project, directed by Jodi Magness of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, has been uncovering the remains of a monumental synagogue. The synagogue was built around 400 CE, when the Jewish inhabitants of Huqoq, a village in the Lower Galilee, were ruled by Christian Roman emperors. The synagogue was decorated with a mosaic floor depicting an array of biblical stories.* All the other biblical scenes from Huqoq center on men, whether as protagonists or antagonists. More surprisingly, the appearance of Deborah and Yael in the mosaic has no parallel in either Jewish or Christian art from late antiquity and predates other visual depictions of their story by almost a thousand years.

The mosaic raises many provocative questions: Upon what biblical and postbiblical texts did the mosaic draw for its imagery? What can the panel tell us about Jewish attitudes toward gender in antiquity? And why did this story resonate with a Jewish community in Galilee during the fourth and fifth centuries?

* See Jodi Magness et al., "Inside the Huqoq Synagogue," *BAR*, May/June 2019.

DEBORAH AND YAEI. This panel from Huqoq's synagogue depicts the events of Judges 4. In the top register (above), the Israelite commander Barak, armed with a sword and shield, stands before Deborah, who is seated under a date palm. From the biblical text, we know that Deborah summons Barak to tell him to go to war against the king of Hazor and his general Sisera. Barak asks Deborah to go with him. They successfully defeat the enemy, but Sisera escapes on foot. The heroine Yael then lures Sisera to her tent supposedly to hide him (the mosaic's poorly preserved middle register [opposite, top] shows just a fragment of this scene). Instead, when he falls asleep, she drives a tent peg through his temple. The third register of the panel (opposite) shows this final scene: Yael grasping a tent peg and hammer in her hands and a giant Sisera dead on the ground with his weapons lying around him.



SPECTACULAR SYNAGOGUE. Some of the earliest Jewish art comes from the late fourth- or early fifth-century CE synagogue at Huqoq in the Lower Galilee. Colorful mosaics cover the synagogue's floor and depict a variety of biblical and historical scenes.

The Deborah and Yael mosaic is located at the south end of the synagogue's west aisle. The panel is preserved in two sizable fragments that allow us to identify the subject matter of the scene and to provide a secure reconstruction of its narrative sequence and thematic emphases. It is divided into three registers of roughly equal size that are read from top to bottom.

In the Hebrew Bible, the story of the Israelite defeat of King Jabin of Canaan and his general Sisera is told in two distinct accounts, one a prose narrative (Judges 4) and the other a poetic composition known as the Song of Deborah (Judges 5). Although the two versions overlap in their general narrative arc, they also diverge both in terms of their thematic interests and specific details. Scholars generally agree that the narrative has its roots in early Israelite culture and that the version in Judges 5 is the older of the two.* But it must also be remembered that we are dealing with a tradition that developed in numerous stages over the centuries and took expression in many variations, only two of which were eventually

* See Lawrence E. Stager, "The Song of Deborah—Why Some Tribes Answered the Call and Others Did Not," *BAR*, January/February 1989.

incorporated into the Book of Judges.¹ The creators of the Huqoq panel could, therefore, have drawn on a broad pool of Deborah and Yael traditions, including various postbiblical retellings and interpretations of the story that were in circulation in the late Roman period.

We believe the scene depicted in the panel is more closely aligned with features of the narrative as recounted in Judges 4 in contrast to the rendition in Judges 5.

In the top register of the panel, Deborah appears under a date palm whose fronds extend over her head. The figure of Deborah is damaged; only her veiled head and upper right arm are preserved. In Judges 4:5, Deborah performs her work as judge and prophet while sitting beneath a palm tree located between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim.

This image of a commanding Israelite woman seated beneath a palm on the eve of battle would have been particularly potent in the context of a synagogue mosaic from late fourth- or early fifth-century Palestine. Synagogue-attendees might have seen in this image a powerful—and subversive—rejoinder to the anti-Judean imagery propagated by the Romans on *Iudaea capta* coins and in other mediums following the First Jewish Revolt (66–73 CE), in which a woman, who embodies the defeated Jewish people, sits in mourning beneath a palm tree, often alongside the arms or armor of the conquered.

In front of Deborah stands the partially preserved figure of the Israelite commander Barak, who has arrived armed for battle. He holds a raised sword in his right hand and a shield in his left. The imagery, particularly the intensity of the protagonists' gazes, evokes the tense exchange recounted in Judges 4:8–9 between Deborah and Barak regarding his unwillingness to wage war without her help, and her warning that his reluctance will mean that the Israelite victory will not bring him glory but instead Sisera will be delivered into the hands of a woman.

Much transpires in the unrepresented interval between the episodes depicted in the top and middle registers (Judges 4:10–16; 5:12–22). Barak, accompanied by Deborah, musters an army from the tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun in the north and goes to Mt. Tabor in the Lower Galilee (see p. 30). Upon hearing this news, Sisera summons his own army and meets the Israelite

force. In an act that surpasses the cowardice expressed by Barak and advances the fulfillment of Deborah's prophecy, following the disastrous defeat of his forces at the Kishon River, Sisera flees on foot from the battlefield to the tent of Yael, the wife of Heber the Kenite who was on good terms with the Canaanites (Judges 4:15–17).

Despite extensive damage to the middle register, the scene appears to depict Sisera resting on a low stool in the tent of Yael. The positions of the left foot and right lower leg of Sisera indicate that the Canaanite general is depicted in profile view. His right lower leg overlaps the shield lying near his feet. All that is preserved of Yael is one of her feet, upon which she wears a shoe like the one she wears in the bottom register. From the orientation of her foot, it seems that Yael stands before Sisera, likely offering him a drink of milk, as recounted in both Judges 4:19 and 5:25.

Medieval Heroines

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Before the discovery of the Huqoq mosaic, the earliest known narrative representations of Deborah and Yael appeared in medieval illustrated picture Bibles and psalters, where they are depicted as heroic women engaged in acts of violence. In the Morgan Picture Bible from Paris (1244–1254), for example, Deborah is shown on

horseback (below) in the thick of battle encouraging Barak and the Israelites to attack Sisera's army. In the next scene, continuous narrative (a type of pictorial representation that illustrates multiple episodes of a story within a single frame) is used to depict Yael offering milk to Sisera, killing him as he sleeps, and revealing his body to Barak.

Similarly, the earliest depiction of Yael is found in the *Speculum Virginum* ("Mirror of Virgins"), a 12th-century didactic treatise written for female monastics, where she appears alongside Judith as a moral exemplar of Humility. Rather than being a singular hero in a "historical" drama, Yael has here come to embody an abstract virtue.



The scene in the bottom register, which is the best preserved of the three, also occurs inside Yael's tent. It depicts Yael wielding a hammer, which she uses to drive a tent peg through Sisera's temple and into the ground (Judges 4:21; 5:26–27). Sisera lies dead on his side, his head bleeding profusely, and his eyes rolled back into his head. By comparison to Yael, Sisera is a gigantic

Huqoq's Judges

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The Deborah and Yael panel is not the first scene from the Book of Judges to be found at Huqoq: In 2012–2013, two episodes from the Samson cycle (Judges 13–16) were found in the south end of the synagogue's east aisle. This kind of symmetry between thematically related panels is characteristic of the Huqoq mosaics.

Violent conflict with foreign powers is a central theme of the Book of Judges. There are significant differences, however, in the way the stories are told in the mosaics. The Deborah and Yael mosaic depicts multiple episodes from the story arranged in horizontal registers within a single panel. By contrast, in the Samson panel, scenes that depict Samson and the foxes (Judges 15:4–5) and Samson and the gate of Gaza (see below, Judges 16:3) are placed side by side and therefore would have been viewed sequentially. These differences in representation reflect the diverse visual approaches to storytelling employed throughout the synagogue mosaics.

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figure, perhaps reminiscent of Goliath in contemporary representations of his famous defeat at the hands of David (1 Samuel 17). Sisera's weapons are arrayed around him. The hilt of his sheathed sword protrudes from behind his left hip, while the end of the scabbard is visible beneath the back of his right thigh. Sisera's lifeless right hand loosely grasps the shaft of a long spear. A battle helmet rests near the general's head, and an oval shield lies at Sisera's feet.

The most compelling evidence for associating the Huqoq panel with Judges 4 appears in the top and bottom registers. In the top register, the depiction of a palm tree as the place of Deborah's judgment and therefore the setting for her encounter with Barak is not mentioned in the parallel poetic account in Judges 5. The death scene in the bottom register hews closely to the description in Judges 4:21 of Yael softly creeping up on Sisera as he sleeps and hammering the peg through his head into the ground. An altogether different picture of Sisera's death is evoked by Judges 5:26–27, where he collapses to the ground after the peg has been driven through his head, suggesting that he was in an upright position at the moment Yael delivered the fatal blow. In this way, the narrative depicted in the panel both begins and ends with episodes that are distinctive to Judges 4.

Unfortunately, it is impossible to assess how the imagery in the mosaic compares to other visual depictions of Deborah and Yael, as the Huqoq panel is not only the first appearance of this story in a synagogue, but also its earliest extant representation. Indeed, artistic depictions of Deborah and Yael only surface in illuminated manuscripts of the late medieval period (see sidebar, p. 57).

To glimpse views of Deborah and Yael that are closer in date to the Huqoq mosaic, we must look to literary images evoked in textual traditions. As befits a provocative tale from the heart of the Book of Judges, early Jewish writers produced myriad responses to Judges 4–5. These adaptations and interpretations range from the celebratory rendering of the narrative in Pseudo-Philo's *Biblical Antiquities* (30–34) to the treatment of Deborah and Yael in Josephus's *Jewish Antiquities*, which slights their role in the victory over Sisera (5.200–201).

Rabbinic literature exhibits an even more pronounced tendency to undermine the authority and stature of Deborah and to impugn the character and motivations of Yael (e.g., *b. Pesahim* 66b; *b. Megillah* 14a–b; *b. Yebamot* 103a–b). These sources are openly distrustful of Deborah's public role as judge, leader, and prophet. For her part, Yael emerges as promiscuous and even lascivious, her heroic deeds belittled by gendered stereotypes. The choice to place this narrative within the space of a synagogue appears to be in considerable tension with the discomfort that some late antique Jews felt about Deborah and Yael.



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At the same time, Judges 4–5 may have formed part of the Jewish lectionary cycles that were in use in late Roman Palestine. At least from the medieval period onward, the story of Deborah and Yael is chanted on the “Sabbath of the Song” (*Shabbat shira*) as the prophetic reading that accompanies the weekly Torah portion of *Beshallah* (Exodus 13:17–17:16) during which the “Song of the Sea” of Exodus 15 is read. Despite the absence of clear evidence for this practice from late antiquity, we might nevertheless speculate that the mosaic’s story of Deborah was also meant to be viewed and understood in relation to the Red Sea panel found in the nave of the synagogue, thereby providing a visual juxtaposition of these two famous biblical “songs” of victory.² It is tantalizing to imagine the Huqoq community regularly commemorating the heroic deeds of Deborah and Yael in this very space.

The strong reactions that Deborah and Yael provoked among the rabbis suggest that gender was a potent theme within the Huqoq panel. The acute tensions between Deborah and Barak and between Yael and Sisera in the account in Judges 4 raised complicated questions regarding the intersection of gender, power, and violence. In this respect, the panel added yet another dimension to the broader story that the Huqoq mosaics sought to tell about the place of Jews in history.

The Huqoq synagogue mosaics communicated ideas about not only religion but also politics and power in

SONG OF THE SEA. The Red Sea panel at Huqoq’s synagogue vividly depicts Exodus 15, the Song of the Sea. Pharaoh’s soldiers, who were chasing the Israelites, are swallowed by flood waters. The mosaic shows them and their horses floundering and being attacked by ferocious fish. After the song, Miriam leads the Israelite women in their own celebration (Exodus 15:20–21). Thus, both the Red Sea panel in the synagogue’s nave and the Deborah panel in the west aisle depict victory songs from the Bible associated with prominent women leaders.

the later Roman Empire. By situating familiar stories about illustrious figures from Israelite or Jewish history within a public building used for prayer, scriptural reading, and other communal functions, the creators of the Huqoq synagogue suffused these traditions with new life. The Book of Judges in particular may have resonated strongly with the synagogue community because they viewed their current circumstances as comparable to ancient Israel’s domination by foreign powers (see sidebar, opposite). The stories represented in the mosaics were not only religiously edifying but also culturally relevant, as they provided the sense that the current tensions they were experiencing within the rapidly Christianizing Roman Empire were nothing new and could be resolved in surprising ways. ^a

¹ See Colleen Conway, *Sex and Slaughter in the Tent of Jael: A Cultural History of a Biblical Story* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2016), pp. 1–26.

² The Song of the Sea and the story of Deborah and Yael are already paired with each other in several classical rabbinic texts; e.g., *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, Shirata* 1 on Exodus 15:1; *b. Pesahim* 118b.