

# Artistic Influences in Synagogue Mosaics

## Putting the Huqoq Synagogue in Context

Karen Britt and Ra'anan Boustan

**THE EXCAVATIONS IN THE MONUMENTAL** synagogue in the ancient village of Huqoq have unearthed a series of colorful and vivid floor mosaics populated with figural scenes that have captivated scholars and non-specialists alike.\* Many of these works of art are not only remarkably well preserved, but also of surprisingly high quality.

The evidence amassed at the Huqoq synagogue since the inception of the project in 2011 is now ripe for initial investigations into the relationship of its decorative program to other contemporary synagogues, as well as to the visual and material culture of the wider eastern Mediterranean world. Indeed,

\*The discoveries at Huqoq have regularly been reported in *BAR* since the launch of the project in 2011. See Jodi Magness, "Samson in the Synagogue," *BAR*, January/February 2013; Jodi Magness, Scholar's Update: "New Mosaics from the Huqoq Synagogue," *BAR*, September/October 2013; Jodi Magness, Archaeological Views: "A Lucky Discovery Complicates Life," *BAR*, March/April 2015; Strata: "More Mosaics at Huqoq," *BAR*, January/February 2017; Strata: "New Huqoq Mosaics," *BAR*, November/December 2017; Strata: "Israelite Spies in Huqoq Mosaic," *BAR*, November/December 2018.



the scenes depicted in the Huqoq mosaics differ sharply from what has long been considered the standard program for ancient synagogues in Galilee—both in terms of artistic themes represented and the ways they are employed. So to what extent are the stunning Huqoq mosaics unusual, and what do they reveal about Jewish society in Late Roman Galilee?

In tackling the challenges presented by what initially appeared to have been anomalous or unique

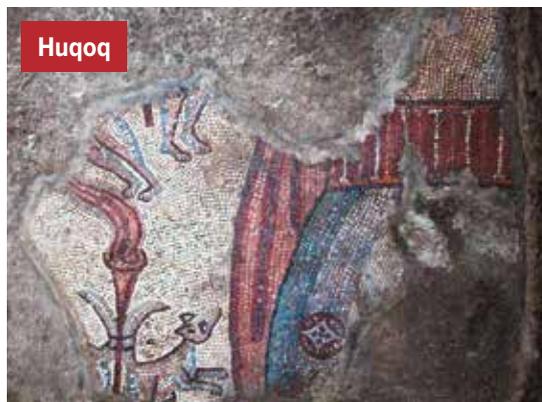
features of the Huqoq mosaics, we have found it productive to consider the social, cultural, and economic contexts of the local village before assessing the extent to which the Huqoq mosaics reflect wider regional and transregional trends. In doing so, we have found that Huqoq provides evidence of a number of intersecting trends in mosaic production that, in our view, should prompt a thorough reassessment of ancient synagogue art.<sup>1</sup>

The two Samson scenes in the east aisle of the synagogue—Samson and the Gate of Gaza (Judges



Khirbet Wadi Hamam

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Huqoq

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16:3) and Samson and the Foxes (Judges 15:4–5)—link Huqoq firmly to its immediate surroundings in Lower Eastern Galilee. The ancient synagogue at Khirbet Wadi Hamam, which lies just 4 miles south of Huqoq, likewise included in one of its aisles a mosaic pavement depicting Samson—the episode from Judges 15:15–17, where the Biblical hero strikes down the Philistines with a donkey's jawbone.<sup>2</sup> Similar to the Huqoq mosaics, the Wadi Hamam Samson is dressed like a Roman soldier and depicted as a giant towering over his Philistine enemies, whom he has killed or wounded.

In addition to their common interest in the Samson cycle, the Huqoq and Wadi Hamam synagogues share two more scenes that have not yet been found

**GIANT JUDGE.** Samson appears in the synagogue mosaics at Huqoq and at Khirbet Wadi Hamam, both located in Lower Eastern Galilee and dating to the Late Roman period. The scene from Huqoq (see left) is based on Judges 15:4–5, where Samson ties together 300 foxes in pairs tail-to-tail with torches and sets them loose in the Philistines' fields. The scene from Wadi Hamam (see above) depicts Judges 15:15–17, where Samson kills a thousand Philistines with a donkey's jawbone. In both, Samson is portrayed as a giant in a Roman soldier's uniform.

in any other ancient synagogue in Roman Palestine: the building of the Tower of Babel and Pharaoh's soldiers being swallowed by the Red Sea. The Tower of Babel panel at Wadi Hamam depicts individuals and small groups of workmen engaged in many of the same construction tasks represented in the scene at Huqoq. Both mosaics include vignettes of two workmen striking each other with the same tools.

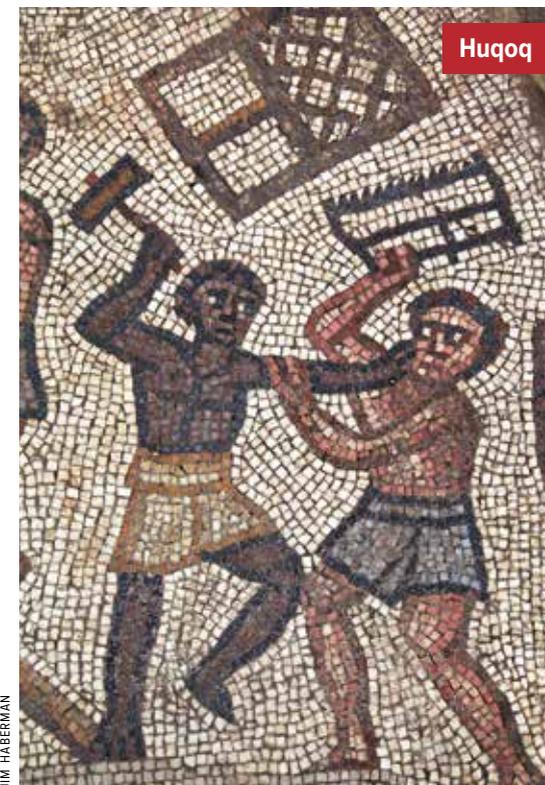
Both synagogues also depict the parting of the Red Sea with Pharaoh's soldiers being swallowed by large fish amid overturned chariots and horses. The focus on the drowning of the Egyptian army in the panels at Huqoq and Wadi Hamam stands in sharp contrast to most other Jewish and Christian depictions of this episode, which highlight the role of Moses and the experience of the Israelites.

The synagogues at Huqoq and Wadi Hamam have the same architectural layout and are paved with



Huqoq

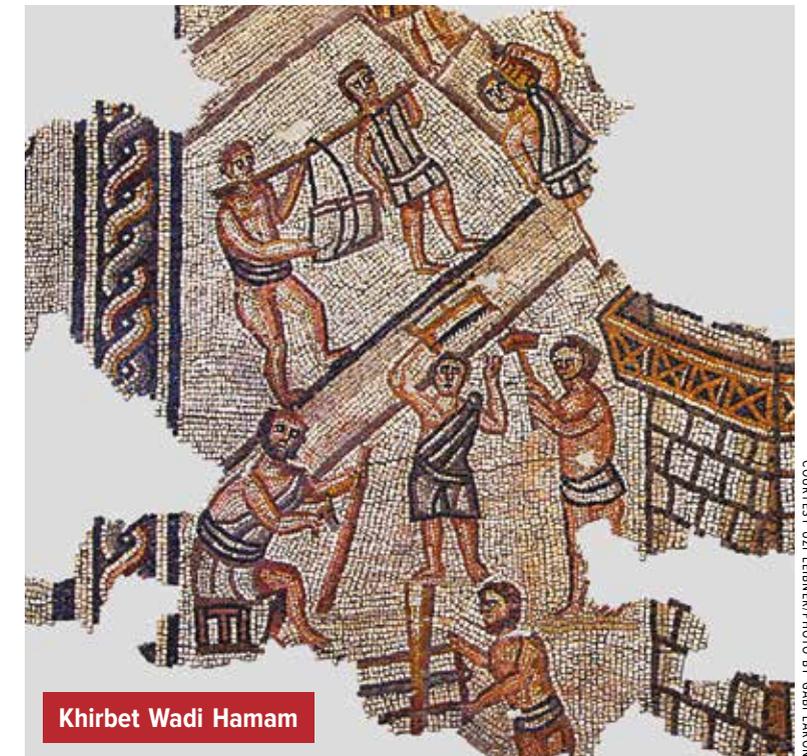
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Huqoq

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mosaics depicting some of the same Biblical stories arranged in panels. This reflects local trends and preferences among these Jewish congregations in Lower Eastern Galilee. If more of the mosaics at Wadi Hamam were preserved, the observed similarities between the mosaics in the two buildings would likely be even stronger. While the nave mosaics in the Wadi Hamam synagogue survive only in small fragments, it is probable that, as at Huqoq, there was a Helios-zodiac cycle in the center of the hall. However, the appeal that certain themes held for some Jewish communities in Lower Eastern Galilee does not explain all of the features of the Huqoq mosaics. Therefore, we must widen our geographic circle to understand their context within the larger region.



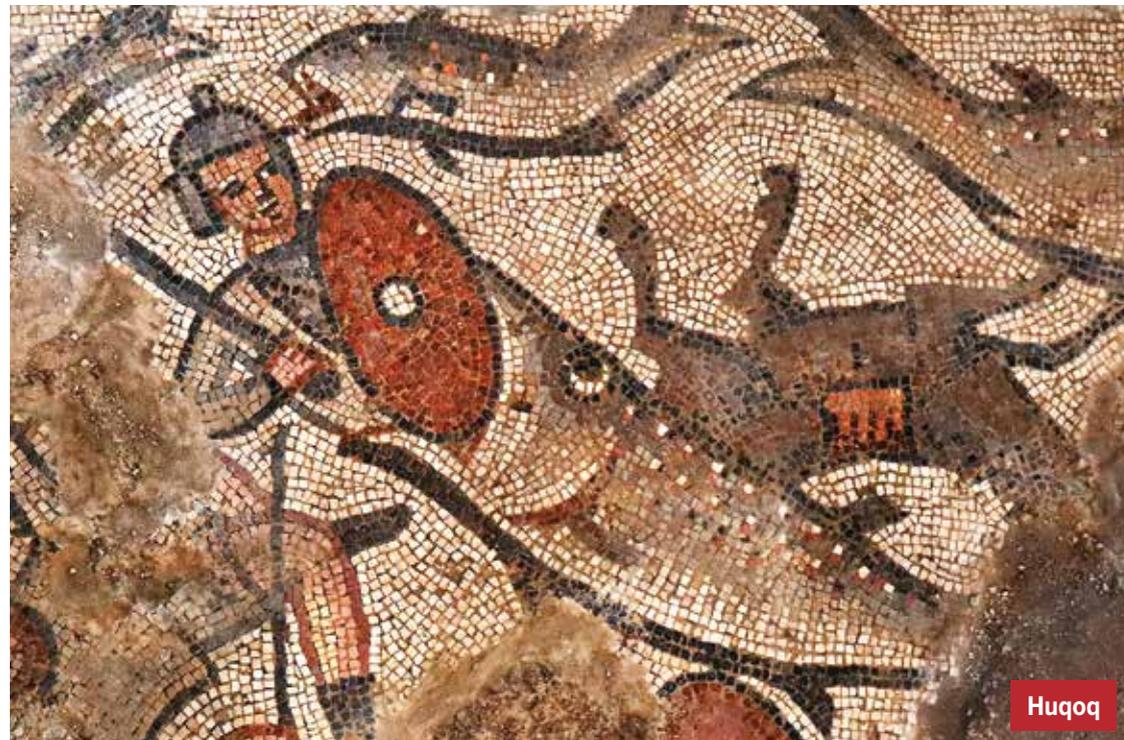
Khirbet Wadi Hamam

COURTESY UZI LEIBNER/PHOTO BY GABI LARON

**UNDER CONSTRUCTION.** Using a variety of tools and devices, workmen build a large tower. This scene, which appears in mosaics at both the Wadi Hamam (see upper right) and Huqoq (see left images) synagogues, shows the construction of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1–9). Sharing an artistic tradition, these scenes depict workmen using—and even fighting over—the same kind of tools.

The Helios-zodiac cycle at the center of the nave of the Huqoq synagogue offers an illuminating example. Although a zodiac cycle is included in the mosaic floors of at least eight other ancient Palestinian synagogues,<sup>3</sup> the design at Huqoq is rare. Zodiac cycles in other synagogues are usually arranged as two concentric circles, with the inner circle containing Helios, and the outer circle containing the zodiac signs in 12 wedge-shaped spaces. Such is the case, for example, at Hammath Tiberias, Sepphoris, and Beth Alpha. At Huqoq, however, the Helios-zodiac cycle consists of a central medallion surrounded by interlacing roundels.

The only other known example of this arrangement is at Yaphi'a, near Nazareth. The similarities between the Huqoq and Yaphi'a zodiacs are striking—from the interlacing circles to the dolphins in the triangular spaces between the circles. At Yaphi'a, only two roundels are preserved: one containing a bull and the other a horned animal of which only the head and partial Hebrew inscription are



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Khirbet Wadi Hamam

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**RED SEA RISING.** The waters of the Red Sea crash over Pharaoh's army—drowning his soldiers, overturning their chariots, and bringing large predatory fish. This chaotic scene (from Exodus 14:1–15:21) appears in mosaics at Huqoq's synagogue (see top) and Wadi Hamam's synagogue (see bottom).

preserved. Scholars were divided over whether these animals represented signs of the zodiac or the 12 tribes of Israel. Gideon Foerster, an archaeologist at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, suggested in 1987 that the signs of the Yaphi'a zodiac appear in the roundels alongside inscriptions referring to the 12 tribes.<sup>4</sup> The zodiac cycle uncovered recently at Huqoq supports this suggestion, as the Helios medallion was once encircled by 12 trapezoidal panels, two of which contain partially preserved Hebrew inscriptions that appear to cite verses from Genesis 49 referring to the 12 tribes.

The links between Huqoq and Yaphi'a go even deeper. A fragmentary mosaic panel at the northern

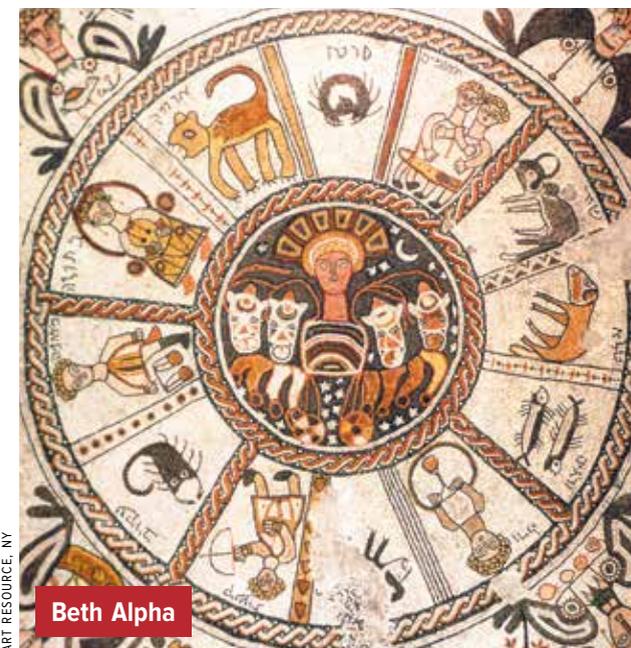
end of Huqoq's nave contains parts of a human figure and a horse (or a centaur, a human figure with a horse's body). The figure supports a vessel on its head with its left hand. One small fragment of mosaic seems to show the partial wing of a bird that once stood on the vessel. If this is the case, the Huqoq mosaic resembles a panel in the nave of the Yaphi'a synagogue, which displays an eagle with outspread wings standing on a volute-shaped pedestal with the head of Medusa at its center.

Just as the Huqoq mosaics aid in understanding the mosaics in the synagogue at Wadi Hamam, they also shed light on Yaphi'a, whose significance has been underappreciated due to its poor state of



Sepphoris

COURTESY OF PROF. ZEEV WEISS, THE SEPPHORIS EXCAVATIONS/ THE HEBREW UNIVERSITY OF JERUSALEM/PHOTO: GABI LARON



Beth Alpha

ART RESOURCE, NY



Huqoq

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Hammath Tiberias

ZEEV RADOVAN/BIBELANDPICTURES.COM

**ZODIAC THRILLERS.** Zodiac calendars appear on several ancient synagogue floors. The zodiac mosaics from Beth Alpha (lower left), Sepphoris (upper left), and Hammath Tiberias (lower right) all feature two concentric circles with the Greco-Roman sun god Helios driving his chariot across the sky in the central medallion. In the mosaic from Sepphoris, Helios is personified as a sun disk. The outer circle of these three mosaics is divided into 12 sections, one for each month and the corresponding zodiac sign. The design of the zodiac mosaic at Huqoq (see upper right) is distinct. Although it also depicts Helios in its central panel, the months are arranged in roundels. Further, 12 trapezoidal panels with inscriptions about the 12 tribes of Israel (Genesis 49) once encircled the central panel—separating the central medallion from the months.

preservation. The affinities between the mosaics at Huqoq and villages of Wadi Hamam and Yaphi'a caution against focusing too exclusively on well-known urban sites, such as Sepphoris and Hammath Tiberias, as our primary sources of knowledge for the production of mosaics in the region. Indeed, these

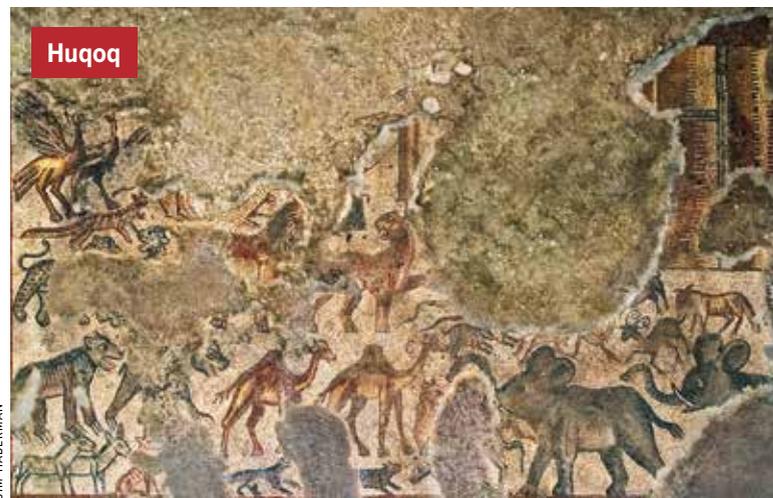
connections underscore how little we know about mosaic production in ancient synagogues, particularly in rural areas.

Local and regional contexts do not fully account for the choice of scenes in the Huqoq mosaics, which also display striking similarities with mosaics



Mopsuestia

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Huqoq

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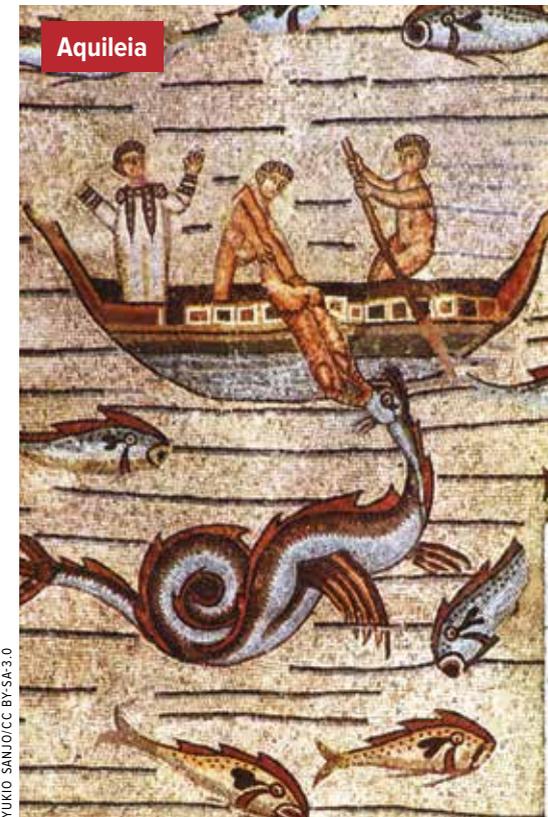
**ANIMAL HOUSE.** Coming in pairs, animals stream to Noah's ark. This episode from Genesis 7:9 appears on mosaic floors from Huqoq's synagogue in Israel and from a public building, which may be a synagogue, at Mopsuestia in Turkey. In both of these mosaics, Noah's ark is depicted as a wooden box on legs.

scene (in the nave). Interestingly enough, this corresponds to the placement of these panels in the Huqoq synagogue.

The arrangement of the Noah panels at Mopsuestia and Huqoq is also similar: The ark is depicted as a wooden chest supported by four legs, is placed at the center of the scene, and is surrounded by animals. Noah's ark was a popular theme in early Christian art. It was depicted on sarcophagi, in catacomb paintings, and in manuscript illuminations—but not in church floor mosaics.

in other parts of the Mediterranean world. Transregional connections may explain the uncanny parallels between the mosaic floors at Huqoq and in a public building in Mopsuestia (modern Misis) in Cilicia, northwest of Antioch in Asia Minor (modern Turkey). Since its discovery, in 1955, scholars have been divided over whether the Mopsuestia building is a synagogue or a church. Its mosaic floors include a panel depicting Noah's ark (located in the nave), a Samson cycle (in the aisle), and possibly a Jonah

In addition to the Noah panel in the nave, an aisle in the Mopsuestia building has an extensive Samson cycle that included as many as 11 scenes accompanied by inscriptions from the Book of Judges (especially 14:6–16:30). Although the mosaic panels are not well preserved, it is clear that Samson appears as a giant. The excavator of the building at Mopsuestia suggested that a fish found in a fragmentary panel in the nave belongs to a depiction



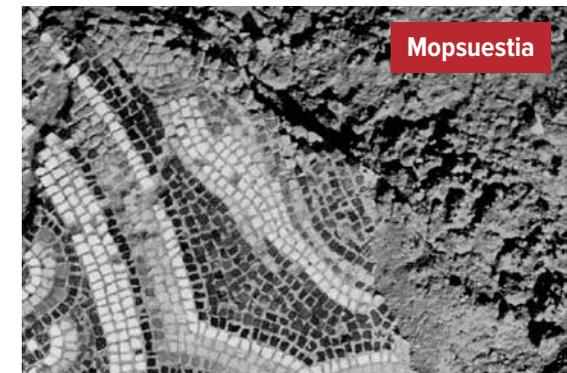
Aquileia

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Huqoq

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Mopsuestia

FROM LUDWIG BUDE, ANTIKE MOSAIKEN IN KILIKIEN, VOL. 7: FRÜHCHRISTLICHE MOSAIKEN IN MISIS-MOPSUESTIA (BONNEN, 1969)

of the story of Jonah, citing as a possible parallel the Jonah cycle in the early fourth-century mosaic floor in the basilica at Aquileia in Italy. The popularity of the Jonah story in early Christian art has been used to support the identification of the building at Mopsuestia as a church. However, the discovery of the Jonah scene at Huqoq—which is the first definite depiction of this story in ancient Jewish art—strengthens the intriguing connections with Mopsuestia and supports the possibility that it was a synagogue, not a church.

The Huqoq mosaics indicate that local Jewish communities had a great deal of freedom in choosing and arranging the decoration of their synagogue buildings, apparently reflecting their particular interests. At the same time, the Huqoq mosaics make conspicuous use of subject matter drawn from Classical art, as well as figures from Greek and Roman mythology and history, suggesting that the villagers had a somewhat cosmopolitan outlook.

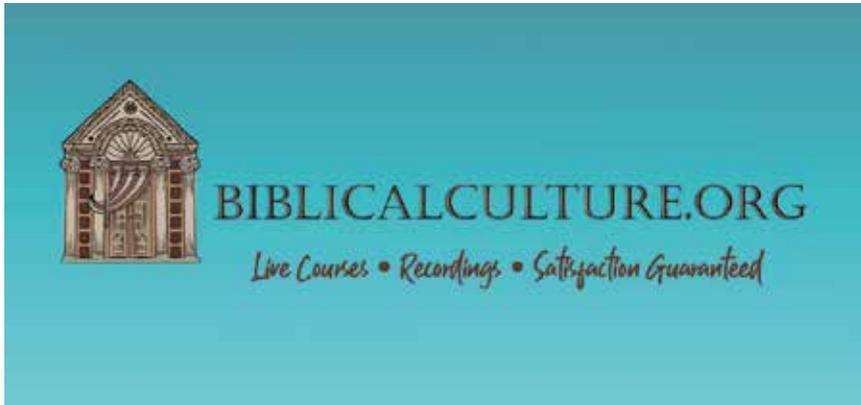
None of the Huqoq mosaics has elicited more interest than the enigmatic Elephant Panel, which may depict a historical event from the Hellenistic period.<sup>5</sup> If so, it would indicate that interest in the past among the Jewish communities in Galilee could transcend the boundaries of sacred scripture and encompass historiographic traditions that circulated

**FISH TALES.** Running away from God lands Jonah in hot water. To calm a large storm, Jonah's fellow sailors throw him overboard—per his instructions. A fish then swallows him, and he remains in its belly for three days. The above mosaics depict this scene from Jonah 1. In the mosaic from Huqoq's synagogue in Israel (see upper right), a series of three fish swallows Jonah, whereas in the mosaic from Aquileia's church in Italy (see upper left), a sea serpent swallows him. Only a solitary fish (see lower right) survives of this scene from a building at Mopsuestia in Turkey. Scholars debate whether this building was a synagogue or church.

at the messy intersection of Classical, Jewish, and Christian cultures.

In addition to the most immediate connections to villages around Lower Eastern Galilee, the community at Huqoq appears to have had ties to the robust regional networks of mosaic production in the Eastern Mediterranean. Finally, the remarkable similarities with the fifth-century mosaics of the building at Mopsuestia point to contacts with other parts of the Mediterranean world. The Huqoq mosaics thus offer us precious evidence concerning the degree to which even modest rural villages in Galilee participated in the broader cultural and artistic trends of the late Roman world. 

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## Artistic Influences

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<sup>1</sup> Our work on the Huqoq mosaics is indebted to the authoritative study of mosaics in the region by Rina Talgam, *Mosaics of Faith: Floors of Pagans, Jews, Samaritans, Christians, and Muslims in the Holy Land* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press and the Yad Ben-Zvi Institute, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> See Uzi Leibner and Shulamit Miller, “Appendix: A Figural Mosaic in the Synagogue at Khirbet Wadi Hamam,” *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 23 (2010), pp. 238–264; Shulamit Miller and Uzi Leibner, “The Synagogue Mosaics,” in Uzi Leibner, ed., *Khirbet Wadi Hamam: A Roman-Period Village and Synagogue in the Lower Galilee*, Qedem Reports 13 (Jerusalem: The Institute of Archaeology, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem with the Israel Exploration Society, 2018), pp. 144–186.

<sup>3</sup> Na’aran, Beth Alpha, Huseifa, Hammath Tiberias, Susiya, Sepphoris, Yaphi’a, and Wadi Hamam. In addition, the ‘Ein Gedi synagogue inscription (in the narthex) contains a list of the signs of the zodiac and the seasons.

<sup>4</sup> Gideon Foerster, “The Zodiac in Ancient Synagogues and Its Place in Jewish Thought and Literature,” *Eretz-Israel* 19 (1987), pp. 225–234 (Hebrew).

<sup>5</sup> Karen Britt and Ra’anan Boustan, *The Elephant Mosaic Panel in the Synagogue at Huqoq: Official Publication and Initial Interpretations*, JRA Supplementary Series 106 (Portsmouth, RI: Journal of Roman Archaeology, 2017).

## Biblical Views

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Notice too how we meet this slave-girl. She follows Paul and his companions to the “place of prayer” over the course of “many days,” declaring, “These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation” (16:16–18). It appears everyone, including Paul, ignored her multiple times, though she made it difficult to do so. But it is when Paul does respond and why he responds that is all the more troubling. In the narrative, there’s no hint that the python-girl was speaking untruthfully and needed to be silenced. Rather, Paul simply got annoyed and cast the spirit out of her (16:18). Nothing is said about leading her to the Christian faith or rescuing her from slavery, only that Paul had had enough and finally dealt with her.

How many are like Paul in this story, able to see a Lydia who represents one aspect of society that can do much for him, but blind to the less fortunate? We

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“**Inside the Huqoq Synagogue**” (p. 24): **Jodi Magness** is the Kenan Distinguished Professor for Teaching Excellence in Early Judaism at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She directs the Huqoq Excavation Project. **Shua Kisilevitz** of the Israel Antiquities Authority serves as the Assistant Director of the Huqoq Excavation Project. **Matthew Grey** is Associate Professor of Ancient Scripture at Brigham Young University and an area supervisor on the Huqoq excavations. His research interests include synagogues, Galilean villages, and Jewish society during the Roman period. **Dennis Mizzi** is a Senior Lecturer in Hebrew and Ancient Judaism in the Department of Oriental Studies and an associate member of the Department of Classics and Archaeology at the University of Malta, as well as area supervisor at Huqoq. (For **Karen Britt** and **Ra’anan Boustan**, see below.)



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“**Artistic Influences in Synagogue Mosaics: Putting the Huqoq Synagogue in Context**” (p. 39): **Karen Britt** serves as the mosaic specialist at the Huqoq Excavation Project. She is a Senior Scholar in Visual Culture at Western Carolina University. **Ra’anan Boustan** is a Research Scholar in Judaic Studies at Princeton University and the Huqoq Excavation Project’s site historian.



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“**From Pets to Physicians: Dogs in the Biblical World**” (p. 46): **Justin David Strong** defends his Ph.D. thesis in the Christianity and Judaism in Antiquity program at the University of Notre Dame in June (2019). His dissertation examines Biblical parables against the background of the ancient fable.

“**Who Were the Assyrians?**” (p. 51): **Christopher B. Hays** is the D. Wilson Moore Chair of Ancient Near Eastern Studies at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California. He is the author of *The Origins of Isaiah 24–27: Josiah’s Festival Scroll for the Fall of Assyria* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 2019).



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