prophecy, 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). 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), apparently in celebration 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 depicted as a hybrid mixture of stone, woodworking, and an elaborate pulley system, as they quarried stone, woodenworking, and a elaborate pulley system appear around the tower. The workmen are differentiated by hairstyles and facial hair, clothing, and even color in an attempt to portray different peoples. Amid the ongoing work, divine punishment for constructing the tower is represented by the death 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 are 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 Christian rule. In fact, many scholars and non-specialists alike have discerned that these mosaics are among the finest to have been preserved for conservation, and the excavated areas are backfilled. Hopefully the site will be developed for tourism after our excavations are completed. 1


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 captured the imaginations of 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 been reported in BAR since the launch of the project in 2011. For summaries, see: Jodi Magness, “The Huqoq Synagogue,” BAR, January/February 2013; Jodi Magness, Scholar’s Update: “New Mosaics from the Huqoq Synagogue,” BAR, November/December 2013; Jodi Magness, “Turkish Fishes,” BAR, January/February 2017; Strata: “New Mosaic Scenes,” BAR, November/December 2017; Strata: “Invisible Spaces 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 interesting trends in mosaic production that, in our view, should prompt a thorough reassessment of ancient synagogue art. 4

The two Samson scenes in the east aisle of the synagogue—Samson and the Gate of Gaza (Judges
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.2 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 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 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.

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,3 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
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. 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 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....
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, which may be a synagogue, at Mopsuestia in Turkey. In both of those mosaics, Noah’s ark is depicted as a wooden box on legs.

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 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 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. 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 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.
Artistic Influences
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1 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).


3 Na’aran, Beth Alpha, Huseifa, Hammath Tiberias, Susiya, Sepphoris, Yaph’u, 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.


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