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.
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.

Huqoq’s ancient synagogue appears in the center of this photo. 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, those in the nave comprise: the elephant panel, the commemorative panel, Samson and the foxes, and Samson with the Gaza gate.
The synagogue is a typical example of the Galilean type: a basilica with the long walls on the east, north, and west sides rounded 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.

Although we have excavated other remains of Huqoq—including the ancient village, the modern Ottoman village, and a significant medieval reuse of Huqoq—including the ancient village, the modern village, and its mosaics discovered through the summer 2017. 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.

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 16:1, 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 female 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 strips over his shoulders after spending the night with a prostitute.
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 man 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

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, not as a successor. 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 Hasmonæan high priest John Hyrcanus.

The 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. This 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 Hasmonæan high priest John Hyrcanus.

The animals 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 end. There is an elaborate border composed of rectilinear 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 south to north, 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 6:15–7:10). 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. To the left (west) of the ark the ark site is a 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 14:14–15:25). The Egyptians, dressed like Roman soldiers, are shown tumbling from wheeled chariots pulled by teams of horses steered by a driver and being attacked or devoured by ferocious fish. The depiction recalls the archaic Song of the Sea (Exodus 15:1–21), 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 rounds—an arrangement
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 animinally, by a sun disk (as at Sepphoris). Fragments of 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
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
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

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 Waits 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.