

Excavations unearth stunning mosaics

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The archeological world has been buzzing since last summer with news that a dig in Israel yielded stunning mosaics that were not only preserved beyond expectations, but presented scholars with some significant firsts.

The excavation of a 5th century CE synagogue in Huqoq, an ancient Jewish village in the Lower Galilee near Capernaum and Magdala (modern day Migdal), has revealed a mosaic floor that provides the first depiction of the story of Jonah found in ancient Jewish art, the first portrayal of an episode that is considered so minor it barely merits mention in the Bible, and the first non-biblical story adorning an ancient synagogue.

The find reflects an “unparalleled, rich repertoire of biblical and non-biblical scenes,” the project’s leader, Prof. Jodi Magness of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, told *The CJN* in a phone interview.

Magness and her team began the excavation in 2011. There were indications that there had been a synagogue in the prosperous Jewish village of Huqoq, but its precise location was unknown.

The team unearthed a large, well-constructed building made of big blocks of stone – in all, about 20 metres long by a little under 15 metres wide.

“Not only does it have these amazing mosaics but also richly decorated walls and columns that were covered in painted



The head of a royal figure, thought to be Alexander the Great. JIM HABERMAN PHOTO

plaster,” Magness said. “And some of the paint is still adhering to columns. I like to say it was a very kitschy synagogue.”

But what really attracted attention were the magnificent mosaics paving the floor.

Typically, Galilean synagogues from this period were paved with flagstones, Magness explained. The few floor mosaics discovered have been very poorly preserved, but those at Huqoq are 70 to 75 per cent preserved.

“There’s nothing else like it,” Magness enthused.

At least two panels are not biblical. One of them, the so-called elephant mosaic, might suggest the legendary meeting between Alexander the Great and the Jewish high priest in Jerusalem. Others have suggested possible Maccabean or Hasmonean interpretations, Magness said.

The other non-biblical mosaic is a helio, or sun-based, zodiac in the centre of the



Prof. Jodi Magness at the archeological site.

synagogue. Magness said such symbols have been found in about 10 ancient synagogues in Israel.

The biblically-themed mosaics offer rich references to Samson, the books of Isaiah and Daniel and the story of the spies who bring back clusters of grapes after they scouted out the land for Moses, as described in the book of Numbers. Also found were mosaics depicting the building of the Tower of Babel, Noah’s Ark and one showing Pharaoh’s soldiers being swallowed by giant fish in the Reed Sea.

Apart from the first known depiction of the story of Jonah in a building this old, what’s generated a lot of attention worldwide is a mosaic that was uncovered last summer. It portrays the reference, found on two lines in the book of Exodus, to Elim, a place where the wandering Israelites camped after leaving Egypt because it

had springs of water and palm trees.

“It’s a pretty obscure episode,” Magness said. “That’s one of the things my specialists are trying to figure out. What is it about this particular episode that resonated with this congregation?”

The mosaic is clear, though: The word Elim is rendered in Hebrew.

Magness said her team has excavated approximately three-quarters of the Huqoq synagogue, and estimates it needs another two years to complete the dig. Whether the site will ever open to the public is up to Israel, she added.

Magness is slated to speak in Toronto on Feb. 21 at 6 p.m. at the Royal Ontario Museum’s Eaton Theatre on the excavations at Huqoq, which are co-sponsored by the University of Toronto with donations from the Canadian Institute for Mediterranean Studies. ■

Demands grow for McMaster University to ban Israel Apartheid Week

STEVE ARNOLD

SPECIAL TO THE CJN, HAMILTON, ONT.

Israel detractors at McMaster University are looking for public donations to finance their annual Israel Apartheid Week (IAW).

As the GoFundMe campaign by Solidarity for Palestinian Human Rights nears its \$600 goal, however, Israel supporters are petitioning McMaster’s new president to ban the event.

In a letter, to both McMaster president David Farrar and Hamilton Mayor Fred Eisenberger, Jewish Defence League Canada spokesman Meir Weinstein asked them to intervene to stop the event that he labels “anti-Semitic.”

Weinstein said he was especially troubled that promotional material for the March event features a prominent photo of convicted Palestinian terrorist Leila Khaled holding an assault rifle and featuring the slogan “Don’t forget the struggle.” The image

has also appeared in a mural on the Israeli West Bank security wall near Bethlehem.

The IAW event, he added, is just another part of a “history of anti-Semitism at McMaster” by the SPHR group that has included leaders praising Adolf Hitler, demonizing Jews and glorifying terrorist organizations.

In an emailed statement, a spokesman for the campus group Hillel Ontario said the group “strongly objects” to Israel Apartheid Week.

“McMaster Hillel and Hillel Ontario strongly object to the presence of IAW events on campus and the week’s ridiculous premise,” Ilan Orzy, Hillel Ontario’s director of advocacy and issues management wrote. “IAW is an entirely fringe series of poorly attended events that the vast majority of students ignore.”

In an email, a spokesman for the pro-Israel group Canary Mission accused the McMaster administration of putting Jewish

students at risk by not taking a firm stand against Israel Apartheid Week events.

“We are not shocked at the latest behaviour of SPHR activists, the group’s raison d’être is anti-Semitism and terror support,” the group said. “We are, however, disappointed in the McMaster administration for choosing to turn a blind eye to the inherent anti-Semitism of SPHR and their Israel Apartheid Week at the expense of the safety of Jewish students.”

Allegations of anti-Semitism at McMaster are not new. In 2017, Canary Mission investigated the school and released a report identifying 39 people and 287 social media posts deemed demonizing of Jews, anti-Semitic, pro-Hitler and calling for violence against Jews.

In an email statement, McMaster spokesman Wade Hemsworth said all events on campus are governed by the university’s Student Code of Conduct.

“The group organizing the event in ques-

tion is a student group registered with the McMaster Students Union,” he wrote. “All such groups are governed by McMaster’s Student Code of Conduct, which promotes the safety and security of all students and encourages respect for others.

“The university also provides guidance to all event organizers, which clearly outlines the university’s commitment to free expression and lays out what behaviour is deemed unacceptable.”

Khaled was involved in two airline hijackings in 1969 and 1970. In the second an Israeli steward was shot by her male accomplice who was, in turn, killed by Israeli sky marshals. The steward recovered. Khaled was captured and held in a British prison until released in exchange for passengers taken in another hijacking.

As of Feb. 12, SPHR’s crowd funding drive had raised \$450 from 11 donors. One donation was for \$100 while others were for \$50 or less. ■