

ANCIENT SYNAGOGUES REVEALED

1981-2022



Map of Sites in Israel (drawing by Roi Sabar)

ANCIENT SYNAGOGUES REVEALED 1981–2022

EDITED BY
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Israel Exploration Society



The Institute of Archaeology,
The Hebrew University of Jerusalem



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Preface

Forty years ago, in 1981, volume one of *Ancient Synagogues Revealed* first appeared, describing the archaeological discoveries of some 38 ancient synagogues in Israel and the Diaspora. Since then, about 40 additional synagogues have been uncovered, and the Israel Exploration Society has decided to publish a second volume that will apprise the reader of these latest archaeological discoveries. The archaeological and historical data culled from these excavations not only reveal a plethora of synagogue buildings, artistic remains, inscriptions, and small finds that shed light on many aspects of this ancient institution, but they have also exponentially increased the number and range of scholarly interpretations and theories regarding the synagogue in the first millennium of its existence. No less important is the current approach accepted in most academic circles that finds little justification in searching for only one truth on any issue; instead, it maintains that diverse opinions and approaches should be considered legitimate and applicable to every aspect of scholarly research regarding the ancient synagogue—archaeology, history, art, epigraphy, language, and literature. What's more, such an open and inclusive approach could, in fact, only enhance and enrich the study of this institution, allowing for multiple new and creative interpretations of the finds. The articles in this volume reflect the findings and interpretations of their authors and are not necessarily those of the editors. A selected bibliography is appended to each article for further reading and for additional interpretations regarding finds at specific sites.

Below are three discussions regarding various aspects of this institution, each written by one of the editors of this volume. These discussions further underscore the diversity of scholarly opinions in the current state of synagogue studies.

It is hoped that this volume will not only complement the first one but will also offer the reader new insights into the many components of the ancient synagogue, which served as the religious and communal institution par excellence of the Jewish (and Samaritan) populations.

It is our pleasure to acknowledge the help of several people in the preparation of this volume: to Hillel Geva, former director of the Israel Exploration Society, who initiated the publication of the second volume of *Ancient Synagogues Revealed*; to Rona Avissar Lewis, the current director, who assiduously continued to work on this volume until its completion; to Alan Paris, who translated the articles first published in Hebrew in *Qadmoniot*. This was not an easy task and Alan did so with great skill; to Avraham Pladot, whose professional eye produced the volume in its present form; last but not least, to Hani Davis, who meticulously edited each and every article, maintained contact with the authors, coordinated the work of the editorial board, and took care of all matters until the completion of the manuscript for publication. We would like to thank Hani from the bottom of our hearts for her dedication and first-rate editing job and for the privilege of working with her.

Jerusalem, May 2023

Lee I. Levine
Zeev Weiss
Uzi Leibner

The Ḥuqoq Synagogue Excavations: Report on the 2011–2018 Seasons

Jodi Magness, Shua Kisilevitz, Matthew Grey, Dennis Mizzi,
Karen Britt, and Raʿanan Boustan*

Ḥorvat Ḥuqoq lies 3 km northwest of the Sea of Galilee, on a moderate hill surrounded by arable land and alluvial plains on the west. The remains of the ancient settlement (ca. 25–30 dunams) are covered partly by the ruins of the nineteenth- to early twentieth-century village of Yaquq (ca. 10 dunams), which was inhabited until 1948.

Literary sources indicate that Ḥuqoq was an agricultural village in the biblical, post-biblical, medieval, and modern periods. The earliest reference is in Josh 19:34, where “Ḥuqoq” is listed

as a village allotted to the tribe of Naphtali after the Israelite conquest of Canaan. References in rabbinic literature indicate that Ḥuqoq was a Jewish village in the Late Roman and Byzantine periods. For example, the Jerusalem Talmud mentions Ḥuqoq in several accounts from the late second to mid-fourth centuries, including those of “R. Ḥizqiyah of Ḥuqoq” (חזקיה חוקוק; *y. Sanhedrin* 3.10.21d), of “Yoḥanan of Ḥiqoq” (יוחנן חיקוקיא) who brought a saddlebag full of bread pieces to R. Ḥiyya in nearby Tiberias (*y. Pesahim* 1.4.27c), and of R. Simeon



Aerial view of the Ḥuqoq excavation site, facing southeast and the Sea of Galilee

b. Laqish who visited the village of Huqoq (חִיקוֹק) where he saw locals gathering seeds from wild mustard plants (*y. Shevi'it* 9.1.38c).

Since 2011, a consortium of universities has been excavating at Huqoq under the direction of Jodi Magness. Early stages of this excavation uncovered architectural structures from the ancient and modern village, as well as agricultural and water installations associated with village activities from the Roman period onward. The most prominent feature of the Huqoq excavations, however, has been the discovery of a Late Roman synagogue building adorned with exquisite floor mosaics depicting biblical and non-biblical scenes, which was renovated and rebuilt as a synagogue in the late medieval period.

The Late Roman Synagogue

The Late Roman synagogue at Huqoq is a basilica measuring 20 x 14.19 m, with its long walls on the east and west, its main entrance(s) located in the southern, Jerusalem-oriented wall, and another entrance set in the eastern wall. A stylobate encircled the eastern, northern, and western sides of the building's interior, creating aisles along these three sides that were 0.20 m higher than the floor level in the nave. The number and variety of column bases, pedestals, and capitals—many of which were found in secondary contexts relating to the late medieval synagogue (see below)—present several possible reconstructions involving porch or courtyard areas, a second story gallery, or a clerestory. A mosaic floor divided into a series of panels depicting a variety of biblical and non-biblical scenes decorated the synagogue's floor. Two ashlar blocks laid end-to-end create a step rising from west to east on top of the mosaic floor at the southern end of the nave—perhaps the remains of a *bema* that was dismantled when the medieval synagogue was constructed. Fragments of a large marble menorah were found amid the rubble on the floor nearby.

Pottery and coins from the foundation trench along the eastern wall and radiocarbon dating of charcoal samples from the bedding of the mosaic floor indicate that the synagogue



Aerial view of the synagogue and the late medieval synagogue at the end of the 2017 excavation season. Along the perimeter: the structure's outer walls and stylobate; in the center: the mosaics exposed in the southern part of the nave.

was constructed in the late fourth century CE. It is unclear when or why the synagogue went out of use, and there are no signs of destruction by fire. The mosaics might have been damaged by the eventual collapse of part of the superstructure, perhaps caused by an earthquake. If this is so, such an event occurred only after the building's abandonment, as the collapse overlies a layer of debris covering the mosaic floor. It appears that at least some of the fallen architectural pieces from this collapse were later removed, most likely during the renovations to the building in the late medieval period, when layers of leveling fill were dumped over the mosaics and collapse to support the new floor one meter above it.

The Mosaics

The most spectacular finds from the Late Roman synagogue at Huqoq are the mosaic panels with figural scenes decorating the floors of the nave and aisles. Our discussion below begins with the mosaics discovered in the eastern aisle, moving from south to north and then proceeding from north to south in the nave.

Mosaics in the Eastern Aisle

Samson and the Gate of Gaza

The mosaic panel at the southern end of the eastern aisle depicts an episode from Judg 16:3, in which Samson flees Gaza carrying the doors of the city gate on his shoulders after an encounter with a prostitute. The preserved parts of this scene, which is oriented toward the viewer in the nave, depicts Samson's head, neck, hands, damaged left shoulder, and lower torso, as well as the partially preserved parts of the city gate, two horses, and two male figures. Samson is depicted as an oversized figure with short, wavy, reddish-brown hair; he wears a white tunic cinched with a thick belt and draped with a red cloak. A section of mosaic below and to the left of Samson contains horses and riders, perhaps Philistines.

Samson and the Foxes

To the north of the panel depicting Samson carrying the gate of Gaza is another mosaic

that features Samson and is likewise oriented toward the viewer in the nave. This panel depicts the episode of Samson and the foxes (Judg 15:4–5). The preserved part of the mosaic includes Samson's partial torso and thighs, and two pairs of partially preserved foxes. Here, too, Samson is clearly rendered as a giant wearing a cream-colored tunic decorated with a circular medallion (*orbiculum*), a wide belt cinched at the waist, and a red cloak draped over his shoulder. Samson's red cloak falls in two vertical folds on the left side of the tunic. In both panels, Samson is clothed in garments typical of those worn by soldiers in the Late Roman and Byzantine periods. To the left (or north) of Samson are pairs of foxes with their tails tied to the lighted torches between them (Judg 15:4).

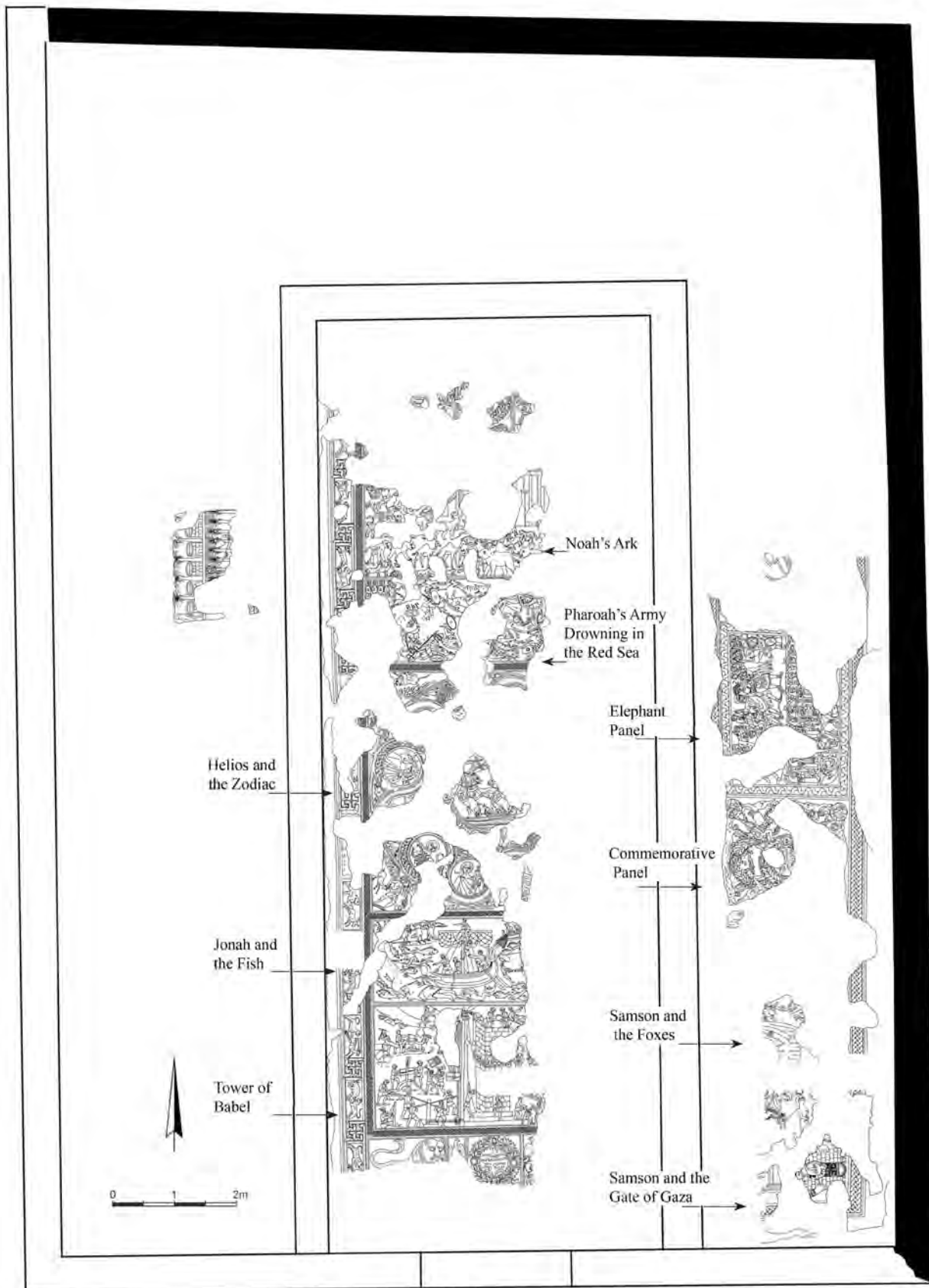
The Commemorative Panel

To the north of the mosaic depicting Samson and the foxes is a square panel, in the center of which lies a medallion with a Hebrew inscription that is oriented to the viewer in the eastern aisle. Although only partially preserved, the inscription likely commemorates the construction of the synagogue by blessing those who adhere steadfastly to all the Jewish commandments (*mitzvot*) or, alternatively, those who made donations to this building.

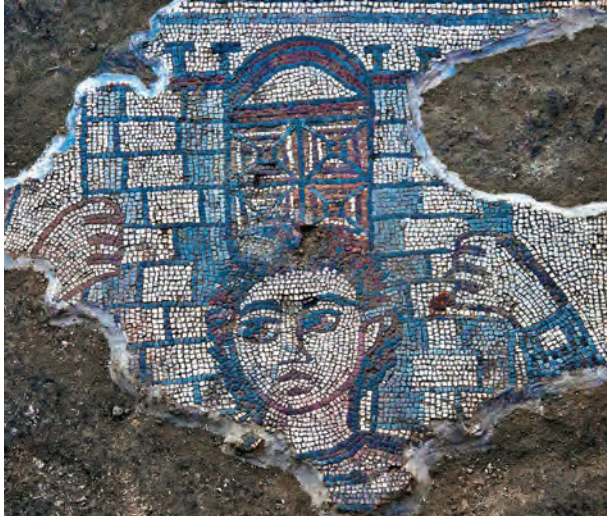
- .1 [וברוכין]
- .2 [כל בני העיר?] שהן
- .3 מתחזקין בכל
- .4 מצות כן יהא
- .5 עמלכן ואמון סל[ה]
- .6 [שולום]

1. And blessed
2. [are all of the people of the town?] who
3. adhere to all
4. commandments. So may be
5. your labor and Ame[n Se]la[h]
6. P]eace

(transcribed & translated by David Amit, "Mosaic Inscription from a Synagogue at Horvat Huqoq," *Bible History Daily* [January 2, 2013], <https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/biblical-artifacts/inscriptions/mosaic-inscription-from-a-synagogue-at-horvat-huqoq/>). We are currently working on a new rendition.



Reconstructed plan of the synagogue's mosaics



Samson and the Gate of Gaza



Samson and the Foxes



Commemorative Panel

The medallion is encircled by a wreath containing roundels flanked by heads on three sides—a female head on each side and a male head on top, all looking at the inscription. A fourth roundel, which has not been preserved, was presumably located below the inscription. The wreath is held up by four male figures (*atlantes*) placed in each corner of the panel. These figures wear tight-fitting trousers belted at the waist and short boots (*calcei*). Their upper bodies are bare and display pronounced pectoral muscles; their arms are raised overhead to support the wreath. The figures are connected by a running floral garland that passes over their left shoulders and behind them. Their feet are positioned on spheres located in each corner of the mosaic panel that are inscribed with human faces or masks and held aloft by two winged putti. The composition of the panel directs the viewer’s attention to the medallion in the center, underscoring the importance of the inscription. This compositional arrangement has parallels in other floor and ceiling mosaics.



Sphere with human face or mask in the Commemorative Panel

*The Elephant Panel*¹

To the north of the Commemorative Panel is the Elephant Panel, an extraordinary mosaic

1 See bibliography for interpretations proposed by scholars not affiliated with the Huqoq Excavation Project.



Commemorative Panel (left); Elephant Panel (right)

that, like its neighbor, is oriented toward the viewer in the eastern aisle, unlike the Samson panels immediately to their south that face in the opposite direction. The narrative is divided into three registers that become incrementally larger from bottom to top, apparently depicting a narrative culminating in the center of the top register with the meeting of two large male figures.

The bottom register seems to depict the aftermath of a battle, including a dead bull near a dead elephant and his rider. The middle register depicts an arcade framing eight standing male figures grasping sheathed swords, flanking a ninth, seated male figure in the center. All the men are clothed in elaborate white tunics and mantles decorated with a *gamma-dion* (the Greek letter *eta*), indicating their high

status. Above each arch is a lighted oil lamp. The figure in the central arch is an enthroned white-haired male holding a scroll. The top register depicts an encounter between two groups of men, each led by a male whose importance is illustrated by his large size and central position. The members of each group gaze expectantly at the dramatic meeting between their leaders. It is this moment of rapprochement that forms the focal point of the top register as well as the climax of the larger narrative depicted in the panel. The group on the left originally consisted of eight young men holding swords and wearing white tunics and mantles, led by a similarly dressed white-haired and bearded elderly male; the same figures are depicted in the middle register. The leader commands attention by pointing with his right hand directly



Elephant Panel



Upper band of the Elephant Panel

up at what, in the context of the scene, must be the sky and holds an object, perhaps a coin or the hilt of a sword, in his left hand, which he offers to the large figure standing opposite him.

The leader of the group on the right wears the dress and insignia of a king or emperor on a military campaign, namely, a cuirass, purple *chlamys*, and diadem. With his right hand, the king gestures toward a bull whose horn he grasps with his left hand. He is accompanied by a phalanx of armed soldiers and two battle elephants. The presence of the phalanx and battle elephants, as well as the diadem worn by the leader, suggests that he is a Greek king, and not a Roman emperor. His dress is not Hellenistic but instead, in keeping with the modes of contemporization in late antique art, conforms with what was worn by emperors at that time.

Although there are no inscriptions identifying the episode represented, the presence in the top register of battle elephants and a Greek king wearing a diadem and purple cloak sets the Elephant Panel apart in the corpus of

ancient synagogue art. In other synagogues, the subject matter depicted in narrative scenes is biblical. In contrast, the composition and iconography of this panel seem to portray an historical event, either real or invented, from the late Classical or Hellenistic period. Possible interpretations of this panel include the depiction of a scriptural narrative, either from the Hebrew Bible or as retold elsewhere in Jewish or Christian traditions; an event from the time of the Maccabean revolt, especially the associated martyrdom traditions; the legendary meeting between Alexander the Great and the Jewish High Priest; and the Seleucid siege of Jerusalem under Antiochus VII Sidetes and the subsequent military alliance between the Seleucids and the Hasmonean High Priest John Hyrcanus.

Mosaics in the Nave

The mosaics in the nave are oriented toward the viewer proceeding from the main entrance in the center of the synagogue's southern wall



Fish swallowing one of Pharaoh's soldiers

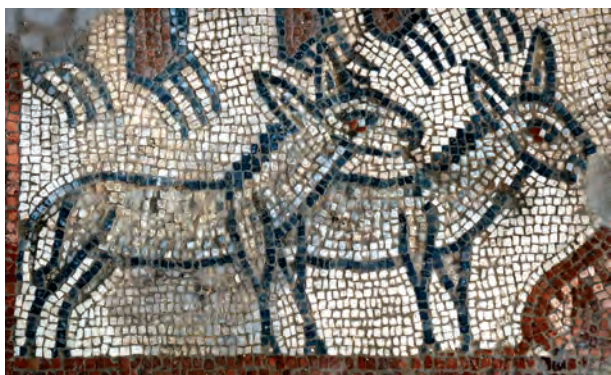
toward the northern end of the hall. The panels are enclosed within an elaborate border composed of rectangular panels depicting animal-chase scenes alternating with squares of a three-dimensional geometric meander motif. The floor in the nave consists of five panels depicting, from north to south, pairs of animals arrayed around Noah's ark; Pharaoh's army drowning in the Red Sea; Helios and the zodiac; Jonah being swallowed by 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.

Noah's Ark

The northernmost panel in the nave depicts Noah's ark surrounded by animals, apparently before embarkation (Gen 6:11-7:10). The scene is divided into registers containing pairs of animals facing the center of the panel. The identifiable animals include donkeys, elephants, bears, camels, leopards, a lion and lioness, snakes, sheep, foxes, and ostriches. Near the



Noah's Ark Panel



Detail of a pair of donkeys in the Noah's Ark Panel

center of the scene is the sole fragment of the ark depicted as a wooden box supported on legs. To the right (east) of the ark is a partially preserved structure with a red tile roof. The relationship between the ark and this structure is unclear, as the connecting segment of mosaic is damaged by a later pit.

Pharaoh's Army Drowning in the Red Sea

The panel south of the Noah's ark mosaic depicts an unusual representation of the parting of the Red Sea (Exod 14:1–15:21). The scene, which shows Pharaoh's soldiers being

swallowed by large fish amid overturned chariots and horses, has strong affinities to the biblical "Song of the Sea" (Exod 15:1–19; cf. Exod 15:21), in which the riders, horses, and chariots of the Egyptian army were cast into the sea. The emphasis in the panel on precisely this aspect of the episode may reflect the recitation of this biblical passage as part of the synagogue liturgy in late antique Palestine.

The mosaic shows Egyptian soldiers wearing Roman military dress tumbling from chariots pulled by teams of horses steered by a driver and being attacked or devoured by ferocious fish. These human, fish, and animal figures are strewn across the panel in a chaotic arrangement that evokes the violent turmoil of the event. The only known example of a Red Sea scene that resembles Ḥuqoq's appears in the nearby synagogue at Wadi Ḥamam, suggesting a localized repertoire of shared themes. Rabbinic literature (*b. Pesahim* 118b; *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, Beshalah, 7; and several *targumim* to Exod 14:30 [Targum Neofiti, Fragmentary Targums, and Targum Pseudo-Jonathan]) attests to the popularity in late antique Jewish culture of the image of the Red Sea swallowing and spewing forth the Egyptian soldiers so that



Drowning of Pharaoh's Army in the Red Sea Panel



Helios and the Zodiac Panel



Part of Helios's chariot, detailing its wheels and white horses

the Israelites might see with their own eyes the corpses of their defeated enemies. The predatory fish in the panels at the two sites may have been intended to portray the sea's power to consume and then disgorge the drowning soldiers, a theme that might be alluded to in the Babylonian Talmud but is quite explicit in the medieval commentarial tradition (*b. Pesahim* 118b, Rashi, s.v. *she-natan lo rabo matanah*). Several rabbinic sources (*t. Soṭah* 3:6–19; *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, Shirata, 2; *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Simeon bar Yoḥai* 28, 1) link the punishment of the Egyptians in the Red Sea to other groups or individuals whom God punished for their hubris, including the generation of the flood and the builders of the tower of Babel, episodes that are likewise depicted in the nave's mosaic at Hızoq.

Helios and the Zodiac

The center of the synagogue nave is decorated with a large square panel containing the image of Helios and the zodiac—a motif likewise depicted in eight other late antique synagogues and listed in the 'En Gedi synagogue inscription. The compositional arrangement of Helios and the zodiac at Hızoq is rare. The usual arrangement of two concentric circles, with the inner circle containing Helios and the outer circle containing the zodiac signs in twelve equally divided wedge-shaped spaces is replaced at Hızoq with interlocking roundels—an arrangement paralleled among synagogue mosaics only at Yafia.

The medallion in the center of the Hızoq mosaic preserves a crescent moon, stars, rays of the sun, and a four-wheeled chariot harnessed to four white stallions. Damage to the figure of Helios in the chariot makes it impossible to determine whether he was depicted as a personification of the Greco-Roman sun god (as at Hammat Tiberias, Bet Alpha, and Na'aran) or represented aniconically by a sun disk (as at Sepphoris). Fragmentary inscriptions, perhaps portions of biblical verses from Genesis 49 associated with each of the twelve tribes of Israel, are visible in the panels encircling the Helios medallion.

Twelve interlocking roundels containing the Hebrew months of the year and the zodiac signs surround the medallion. The preserved months are personified by clean-shaven young men labeled in Hebrew and accompanied by their respective zodiac signs. On the west side of the panel, a sea-goat bearing the tail of a fish (Capricorn) is depicted behind the figure personifying the month of Tevet; the roundel beneath it, to the south, preserves only part of the name of the month Kislev; below it is the figure



Personification of the month of Tevet, with a sea-goat behind him

personifying the month of Marḥeshvan, featuring a large scorpion (Scorpio) in front of it; the next roundel preserves the figure of Tishri accompanied by a small human figure holding scales, the personification of justice (Libra). Personifications of the seasons are depicted in the four corners of the panel: Tishri (Autumn), located in the southwestern 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; two figs appear to the right of the figure wearing a short tunic typical of manual laborers. The male personification of



Personification of the month of Tishri, with the scales of justice

a season is unparalleled in ancient synagogue decorations; other synagogues with representations of Helios and the zodiac exhibit female personifications of the seasons and usually are not winged.

Jonah and the Fish

The panel south of the zodiac presents the story of Jonah, in which the prophet, 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 1:1–2:1). The story of Jonah and the Fish is depicted in a rich setting of marine and maritime imagery, including vignettes drawn from daily life at sea—a small fishing boat with a man casting a net on the righthand

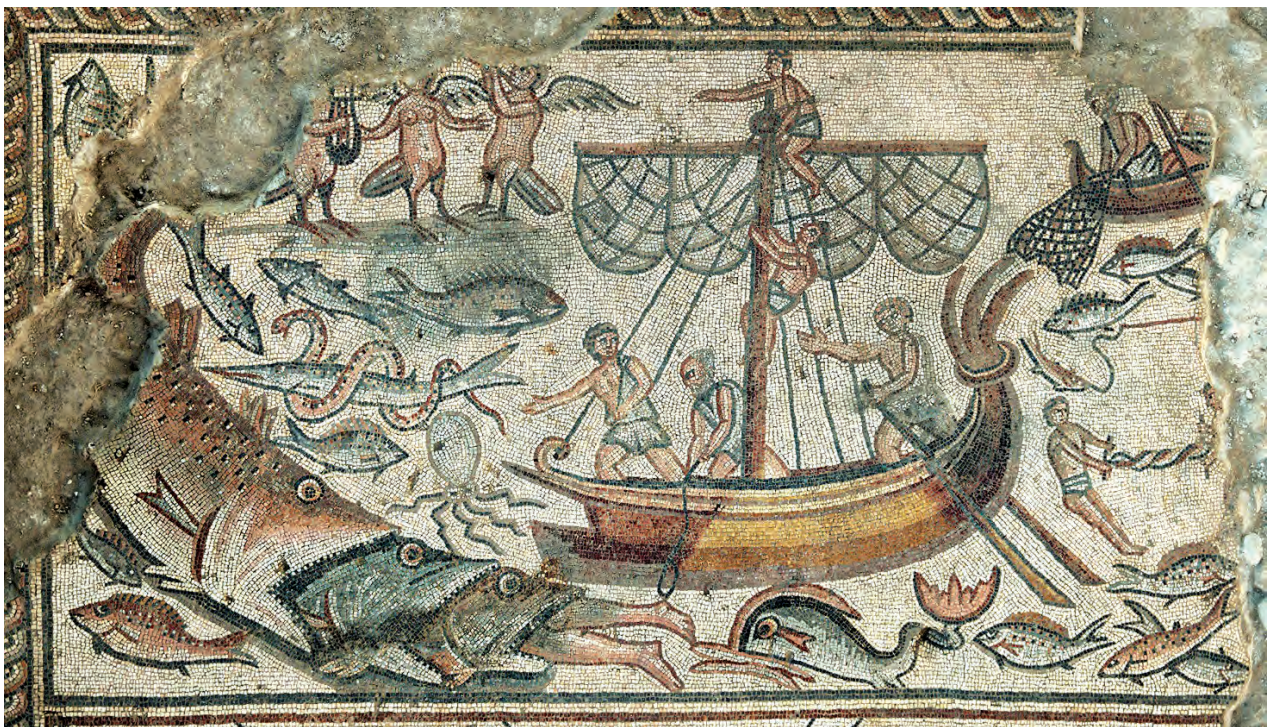


Male personification of the season of Tishri

(eastern) side, while below the fishing boat two men wearing loincloths are wringing out a wet fishing net. The center of the scene prominently features a large sailing ship manned by five sailors, two of whom are climbing the mast. A bearded, partially balding, grey-haired man in the center of the ship—perhaps the captain—is lowering into the water a rope with a loop at the end. Immediately below the rope, Jonah's legs and feet can be seen protruding from the mouth of a large fish, which is being swallowed by two successively larger fish. The depiction



Detail of three fish swallowing Jonah



Jonah and the Fish Panel

of Jonah being swallowed by a succession of three fish has its closest parallels in Jewish and Islamic sources from the medieval period. The panel may attest to the circulation of this exegetical motif among Jews centuries before it found expression in the textual tradition. In the sky, in the upper lefthand corner, 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), attracting the attention 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 figures are to be identified as harpies or sirens. This is the first

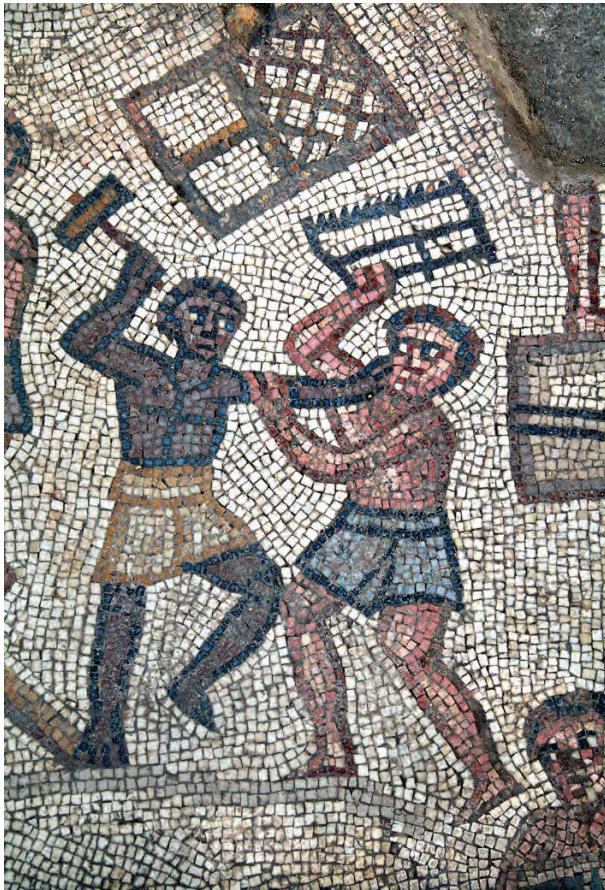
definite depiction of the story of Jonah discovered in an ancient synagogue.

Tower of Babel

The panel south of the Jonah scene depicts the construction of the tower of Babel (Gen 11:1-9) and God's punishment of the people for building a tower intended to reach heaven. The chaos and violence that unfold throughout the panel serve as graphic depictions of the punishment that God exacted from the builders for their act of hubris. In this scene, the workmen are differentiated by hairstyles and facial hair, clothing, and even skin color in an attempt to portray different peoples. Amid the ongoing work, divine punishment for constructing the tower is portrayed by the deaths of some of the



Tower of Babel Panel. The stones on the right depict later construction, perhaps the steps of a *bema* built on the mosaic.



Detail of a conflict between workers
in the Tower of Babel Panel



Detail of carpenters sawing a wooden beam
in the Tower of Babel Panel

life, whether human or animal, appearing in the panels uncovered thus far. The awesome power of water is especially notable in the nave panels depicting Noah's ark before the flood, Pharaoh's army drowning in the Red Sea, and

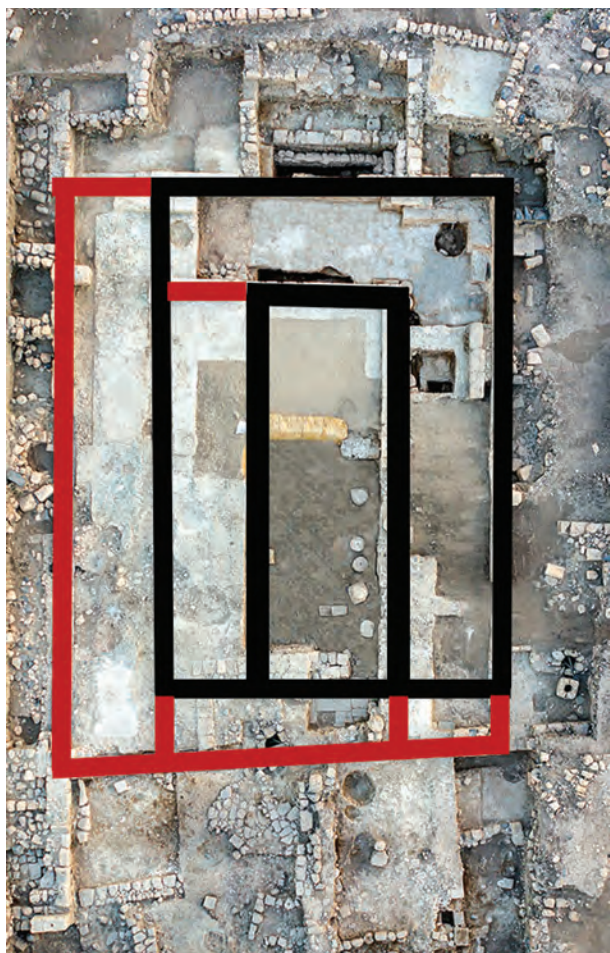
workmen falling headlong from the scaffolding and the ropes of the pulley as well as by a violent fight between workmen. In the center of the scene stands a square tower in the process of being built. Various aspects of the construction process, including the quarrying of stones, carpentry, and an elaborate pulley system are depicted around the tower. The only known example of a Tower of Babel scene resembling that at Ḥuqoq is found in the synagogue at Wadi Ḥamam, where the tower is polygonal instead of square.

Preliminary Observations Regarding the Ḥuqoq Mosaics

Several recurring thematic patterns have begun to emerge in the mosaics of the Ḥuqoq synagogue. Particularly prominent are the leitmotifs of water and the violent destruction of



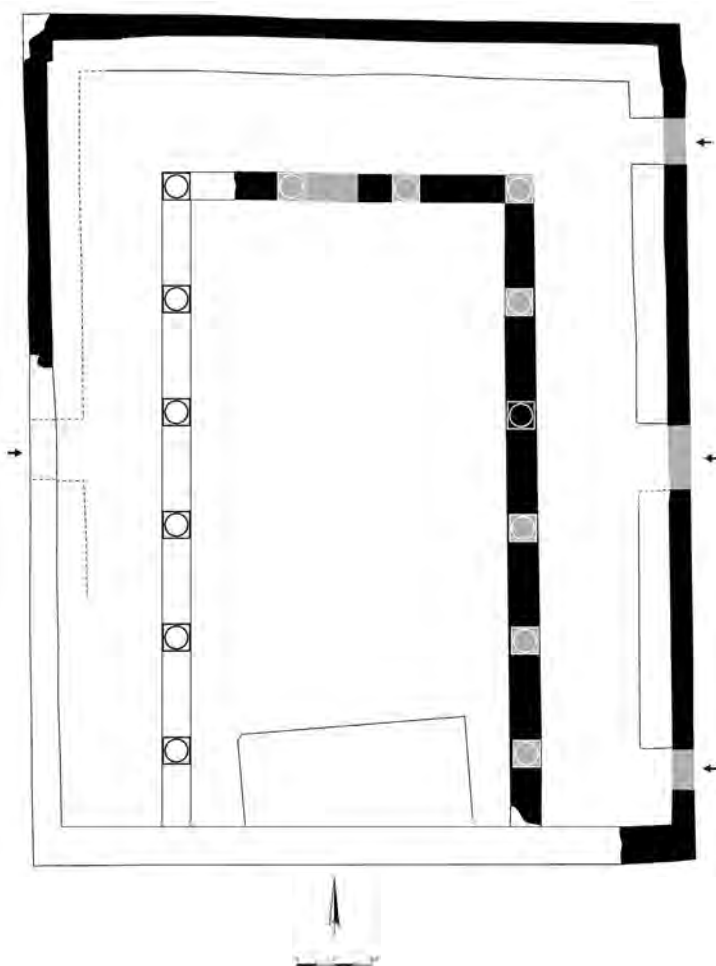
Detail of a carpenter carving wood in the Tower
of Babel Panel. Note the working tool behind his ear.



Integrated plan of the synagogue (black) and the late medieval public building (red)

Jonah swallowed by three fish amid a storm at sea. The themes of crisis and destruction in the nave mosaics (the drowning of the Egyptian soldiers) resonate with the emphasis on conflict with foreign powers in the panels depicted in the eastern aisle (the scenes of military conflict with the Philistines and the Greeks). The Tower of Babel panel likewise dramatizes the violent aftereffects of sin or hubris for a linguistically and ethnically fractured humanity.

Taken together, the Ḥuqoq mosaics call into question the extent to which a common motif or theme guided the creation of these synagogue mosaics, and if there was one, did it convey a uniform message? Moreover, the similarities between the Ḥuqoq and Wadi Ḥamam mosaics suggest that certain themes were of particular



Reconstructed plan of the late medieval public building. Black: extant remains (walls, stylobates, pedestals, etc.); white: conjectured reconstruction of remains that were not exposed by 2018; grey: reconstruction of remains in the excavated areas

importance to Jewish communities in the Lower Galilee.

The Late Medieval Public Building

In the Mamluk period (fourteenth century), a monumental public building was erected on the same spot as the Late Roman-period synagogue, reusing some of the earlier structure's architectural elements but expanding it in size. The synagogue's eastern wall (extending southward) and northern wall (extending westward) were reused, rendering a structure whose total dimensions were 24 x 17.8 m. Like the synagogue that preceded it, the late medieval public building is a basilica with three

entrances in the eastern wall and at least one in the western wall. The nave is separated from the eastern, northern, and western aisles by a stylobate, which on the east and north was built of dressed stones that supported columns on pedestals. The eastern and northern stylobates align with the synagogue's stylobates, while the western stylobate corresponds with the synagogue's western wall. The late medieval public building's stylobates, columns, and pedestals appear to have been taken from the synagogue and lifted one meter above it, to the level of the late medieval floor.

Architectural elements from the synagogue, including plastered column drums that preserve their original painted decorations (red and yellow vine or ivy leaves), were placed underneath and along the late medieval public building's eastern and northern stylobates to support them and the weight of the pedestals. Additional support for the pedestals of the eastern and western stylobates was provided by short but massive buttress walls. Beneath the building's floor is a bedding of large



Column drums from the synagogue, found in secondary use as support for the stylobate in the late medieval public building

cobblestones laid over a thick concrete-like make-up, which is covered with a thick layer of plaster. Very small patches of white or geometric and floral mosaics are embedded in the plaster on top of the make-up in the eastern



Northeastern corner of the synagogue (lower center) and the late medieval public building with the stylobate and pedestals (center)



Column drum covered with painted plaster, from the synagogue, found in secondary use as a support for the stylobate in the late medieval public building

and northern aisles and in the northwestern corner of the nave.

Pottery found beneath the floor indicates that the building was constructed in the

fourteenth century. Two tiers of stone benches made of reused ashlar blocks from the synagogue lined the eastern, northern, and western walls of the late medieval public building. We propose identifying this structure as the first Mamluk-period synagogue ever discovered in excavations in Israel.

Conclusions

The Huqoq excavations provide evidence of a rural Jewish community in the eastern Lower Galilee from the late fourth to sixth centuries. Its inhabitants built a monumental synagogue decorated with figural mosaic floors, colorful painted and molded plaster, and carved architectural elements. If the late medieval public building at Huqoq was indeed a synagogue, it is no less important than its predecessor, as virtually nothing is known about the Jewish settlement in this region in the fourteenth century.

* All the photographs in this article were taken by Jim Haberman by courtesy of Jodi Magness.

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