THE GALILEAN TYPE SYNAGOGUE AT HUQOQ, ISRAEL

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ABSTRACT

Jocelyn Burney: The Galilean Type Synagogue at Huqoq, Israel  
(Advised by Jodi Magness)

One of the most exciting aspects of archaeology is the power of a single discovery to challenge and redirect the field. For the last three years, I have been fortunate to witness this process while working on the excavations at the ancient Jewish village of Huqoq, Israel. Since 2012, the excavation team has uncovered high-quality mosaics in the east aisle of the village synagogue depicting scenes from the life of Samson, a dedicatory inscription, and a panel that may depict scenes from the books of Maccabees. In this thesis, I survey the ways that these discoveries may affect the future study of ancient synagogues, Jewish art, and Jewish society in late antique Galilee generally.

I have chosen to focus on two main topics. Chapter II discusses the similarities between the Huqoq synagogue and the synagogues at Horvat ‘Ammudim, Meroth, and Wadi Hamam, three other Galilean type synagogues that also contain mosaic floors. Scholars previously believed that Galilean synagogues were built in the second and third centuries CE and did not contain mosaics, a feature that emerged in the fourth century. These four synagogues confirm that Galilean type synagogues were built after the third century and contained mosaics. I propose that there likely are more synagogues with similar features in the regions of Lower and Upper Eastern Galilee. Chapter III discusses the imagery of the Huqoq mosaics, which offer insight into the apocalyptic and messianic
beliefs of Jewish communities in late antique Galilee. The chapter concludes with a
discussion of the role of mosaics within synagogues, a subject on which there is little
scholarly consensus. I propose that the purpose of synagogue mosaics should be
reconsidered in light of the redating of Galilean type synagogues. It is now apparent that
many Galilean type synagogues that do not contain mosaic floors, such as Capernaum,
Chorazin, and Nabratein, were contemporary to other synagogues that did contain
mosaics, indicating that not all Jewish communities viewed mosaics as a necessary
feature for a synagogue or a part of synagogue activity.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is a pleasure to acknowledge the individuals and institutions that have supported me in this final project of my undergraduate career. None of this work would have been possible without the encouragement and guidance of my advisor, Professor Jodi Magness, who allowed me to write about material from her ongoing project at Huqoq. It has been thrilling to work with newly discovered material and to write about a site that I have helped excavate.

I am also grateful to Matt Grey, Chad Spigel, and Karen Britt, all of whom are staff members at Huqoq, for allowing me to use unpublished drafts of their articles about the site and for encouraging me in my work. Jim Haberman kindly allowed me to use his photographs of the Huqoq mosaics, and Brian Coussens and Dan Schindler gave me much needed help with the history of modern Yakuk and the pottery from the site, respectively.

Additionally, I am grateful to the Carolina Center for Jewish Studies, which generously offered me a summer travel grant in 2013 to cover the cost of travel to Israel, and the UNC Office of Undergraduate Research, which funded my presentation of a poster on Huqoq at the ASOR annual meeting in November 2013.

Finally, I thank my family and friends for their support, good humor, and for tolerating my constant babbling about ancient synagogues, mosaics, and other old, dusty things. I am truly blessed.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ii

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS iv

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS vii

Chapter

I ANCIENT SYNAGOGUES IN PALESTINE 1

1.1 Introduction 1

1.2 Galilee in Late Antiquity 3

1.3 Galilean Type Synagogues 7

II THE HUQOQ SYNAGOGUE IN CONTEXT: A SUB-GROUP OF GALILEAN TYPE SYNAGOGUES WITH MOSAIC FLOORS 13

2.1 Huqoq 14

2.2 Horvat ‘Ammudim 22

2.3 Meroth 23

2.4 Khirbet Wadi Hamam 28

2.5 Characteristics of the Sub-Group 32

III THE HUQOQ MOSAICS: IMAGERY AND FUNCTION 35

3.1 Scholarship on Synagogue Mosaics 36

3.2 Samson and the Martyrs: the Huqoq Mosaics in Context 39
3.3 The Function of Mosaics in Ancient Synagogues 43

ILLUSTRATIONS 53

BIBLIOGRAPHY 60
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Babylonian Talmud</td>
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<td>BASOR</td>
<td>Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research</td>
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<td>BAR</td>
<td>Biblical Archaeology Review</td>
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<tr>
<td>BDB</td>
<td>Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew Lexicon of the Old Testament</td>
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<td>CCSL</td>
<td>Corpus Christianorum Series Latina</td>
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<td>EI</td>
<td>Eretz Israel</td>
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<td>HA</td>
<td>Hadashot Arkheologiyot</td>
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<td>IEJ</td>
<td>Israel Exploration Journal</td>
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<td>JRA</td>
<td>Journal of Roman Archaeology</td>
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<td>M</td>
<td>Mishnah</td>
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<td>NEAEHL</td>
<td>New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land</td>
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CHAPTER I

ANCIENT SYNAGOGUES IN PALESTINE

1.1 INTRODUCTION

For much of the 20th century, the study of ancient synagogues in Palestine relied on a chronological scheme proposed by Heinrich Kohl and Carl Watzinger in 1916 and later expanded on by others, including Eleazar Lippa Sukenik, Erwin R. Goodenough, and Michael Avi Yonah.¹ This chronology guided the dating of synagogues brought to light during the 20th century and also influenced the study of other aspects of late antique Judaism, including Jewish art, diversity in Jewish belief and practice in late antiquity, and the effect on Jewish populations of events such as the rise of Christianity in the 4th century and the Muslim conquest of Palestine in the 7th century. From the 1970s onward, the discovery of new synagogues and the reevaluation of those with established dates have challenged the validity of this traditional chronology, causing some scholars to reject it altogether.²


The rejection of the traditional synagogue chronology led to a reevaluation of other aspects of late antique Judaism. For example, according to the chronology, synagogue construction in Palestine largely ceased after the fifth and sixth centuries. This was interpreted as evidence of the decline of Jewish communities in Palestine, especially as a result of the Muslim conquest of Palestine. It is now clear that many synagogues continued to function after the Muslim conquest and that Jewish communities in Palestine continued to thrive in the Umayyad and Abbasid periods.³

This reconsideration has also shed new light on the diversity of late antique Judaism. According to the traditional synagogue typology, Jewish communities built synagogues in the architectural style popular at the time. It is now clear that Jewish communities built synagogues in all three styles- Galilean, transitional, and basilica- at the same time, and often in close proximity to one another. What was once considered borrowing from pagan and Christian populations is now proof of a rich variety of artistic and architectural preferences and the diversity of Jewish communities in late antiquity.

This study will discuss the discovery of a new Galilean type synagogue at the site of Huqoq in the Galilee and assess how the features and dating of this synagogue inform our understanding of Judaism in late antiquity. Chapter II includes descriptions of the Huqoq synagogue and the mosaics discovered there in 2012 and 2013, followed by a comparison of the Huqoq synagogue with the synagogues at Horvat ‘Ammudim, Meroth, and Wadi Hamam. These synagogues share a key feature- all are Galilean type synagogues in village settings with mosaic floors rather than flagstone pavements- and therefore constitute a sub-

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³ For example, Zvi Ilan proposes that the Meroth synagogue was used into the 12th century, based on a coin from 1193 found in the synagogue treasury. See Zvi Ilan, “The Synagogue and Study House at Meroth,” in Ancient Synagogues, Dan Urman and Paul V.M. Flescher, eds. (Leiden: Brill, 1995). Hammath Tiberias continued to serve as a center of Jewish learning at least until the 10th century. See Moshe Dothan, Hammath Tiberias, Volume II: Late Synagogues, (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 2000), 5-7.
group of Galilean type synagogues. Chapter III will discuss the content of the Huqoq mosaics and the role that figurative mosaics may have played in synagogue space. The remainder of this chapter will survey the social and political conditions of late antique Galilee, then review the history of scholarship of ancient synagogues and outline the characteristics of Galilean type synagogues, forming a foundation for the chapters below.

1.2 GALILEE IN LATE ANTIQUITY

Synagogues developed into the central institution of Jewish religious life at a time of social and political change. Throughout late antiquity, Palestine stood at a crossroads of empires, with Rome to the west and the Sasanian Empire to the east, and experienced the effects of constant border wars between the two powers. Events such as the sack of Rome in 467, the Jewish-Persian revolt against Heraclius in 614, the Sasanian conquest of Palestine and eventual restoration of Byzantine rule in 622, and the Muslim conquest in 640 threatened the stability of the region. The rise of imperial Christianity in the fourth century and Islamic rule in the seventh century also affected the lives of Jews communities. Amid these and other events, Judaism underwent an internal transformation, adapting to the loss of the Jerusalem Temple by focusing around synagogues and developing a rich literary tradition.

During late antiquity, the village of Huqoq was part of a network of settlements in the vicinity of Tiberias linked by social and economic ties. Villages near Huqoq during the Roman and Byzantine periods included Livnim, Horvat Kor, Khirbat Shune, Horvat Zalmon, Abu Shusheh, Horvat Sabban, Horvat Mimlah, Horvat Ravid, as well as the villages of

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4 This region will hereafter be referred to as Lower Eastern Galilee. It is bounded by the imaginary line from Tiberias to Sepphoris to the south, the foothills of Upper Galilee to the north, the Sea of Galilee to the east, and the valleys of Central Galilee to the west.
Capernaum and Migdal on the shore of the Sea of Galilee.⁵ Tiberias and Sepphoris served as the main urban centers of the region.

After quelling the Bar Kokhba Revolt in 136, Hadrian expelled the Jewish population of Jerusalem from the city, initiating a mass migration of Jews to Galilee. As a result, Tiberias, which lies 11 km southeast of Huqoq, became a center of Jewish scholarship and culture in late antiquity, famously hosting the group of rabbis, including Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi, who compiled the Mishnah in the third century. During the seventh century, the Masoretes, based in Tiberias and Jerusalem, completed the first pointed copy of the Hebrew Bible. Tiberias contained a number of synagogues in addition to the nearby Hammath Tiberias synagogue, which was built in the late fourth or early fifth century to include a figured mosaic with depictions of the zodiac wheel and the Temple.⁶ It is interesting that this type of figured decoration, which may also have been used in other synagogues in the vicinity of Tiberias,⁷ was allowed given the rabbinic population of the city.

In 2007, archaeologists from the Israel Antiquities Authority discovered the remains of a large stone church with a colorful mosaic floor in the center of the Tiberias which they dated to the turn of the fifth century, indicating the presence of a strong Christian community in the city at that point.⁸ Christians were found elsewhere in the region, including Sepphoris

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⁵ Descriptions of these sites can be found in Uzi Leibner, *Settlement and History in Hellenistic, Roman, and Byzantine Galilee* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), passim.


⁷ The Horvat ‘Ammudim and Wadi Hamam synagogues may also have contained a zodiac wheel. See Chapter II for discussion of the sites.

⁸ Excavations were led by Moshe Hartal and Edna Amos of the Israel Antiquities Authority. A final report has not been published, but a summary can be found on the IAA website: http://www.antiquities.org.il/article_Item_eng.asp?sec_id=25&subj_id=240&id=1270&module_id=#as
and the Christian holy sites surrounding the Sea of Galilee. In the late fourth or early fifth century, the church of St. Peter at Capernaum and the church at Tabgha, the site traditionally associated with the multiplication of the loaves and fishes, were renovated and given mosaic floors. Capernaum remained predominantly Jewish, evidenced by the construction of a monumental synagogue in the village in the sixth century, but hosted Christian pilgrims, including a woman named Egeria who came from Europe in the late fourth century and recalled seeing there the remains of the original house of Peter. The Piacenza pilgrim provides a similar account of his travels in Jewish Galilee, continually stressing the fertility of the land (“provincial similis paradiso”) and the prosperity of its people. Interestingly, the renovations to the Capernaum and Tabgha churches occurred at approximately the same time as the construction of many of the monumental synagogues in the vicinity, including Huqoq.

The rise of imperial Christianity in the fourth century also initiated a period of strong anti-Jewish polemic from church leaders. In the *Adversus Judaeos*, John Chrysostom famously called synagogues a “den of wild animals” and a “dwelling place of demons.”

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9 No remains of an early church have been found at Sepphoris, but in 1959, an inscription was discovered that refers to a church from the time of Marcellinus (518 CE). See Michael Avi Yonah, “A Sixth Century Inscription from Sepphoris,” *IEJ* 11 (1961), 184-7. For Christian settlements in Galilee, see Mordechai Aviam, “Christian Galilee in the Byzantine Period,” in *Galilee Through the Centuries: Confluence of Cultures*, Eric M. Meyers, ed. (Winnona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1999), 281-300.

10 During excavations in 1968, three phases of occupation came to light: domestic buildings from the first century BCE (one of which is traditionally considered the house of Peter), a fourth century *domus ecclesia*, and the fifth century octagonal church that is now covered by the modern church. See Stanislao Loffreda, “Capernaum,” *NEAEHL* vol. 1, and the original report in Virgilio Corbo, *The House of St. Peter at Capernaum* (Jerusalem: Franciscan Print. Press, 1970).


13 *Adversus Iudeos* 1.3-4.7
Proclus, the archbishop of Constantinople, expressed a similar viewpoint in his homilies:

“Let therefore the pagans be killed! Let the Jews be destroyed! […] Let heretics be destroyed, and all enemies of the immaculate, catholic, and apostolic church!” These verbal attacks were joined by anti-Jewish legislation, the most aggressive of which was issued during the reign of Justinian (527-65). Included in these laws was a prohibition from 545 against the construction of new synagogues. The number of synagogues in Galilee, and Palestine at large, that were constructed or renovated during the Byzantine period, however, indicates that these laws were not always enforced.

Late antiquity also witnessed the birth of a new Jewish liturgical tradition including communal prayers such as the ‘Shema and ‘Amidah, piyyutim (liturgical poetry in Hebrew and Aramaic), and targumim. These liturgical texts reflect the beliefs and concerns of Jewish populations in late antiquity, such as the restoration of the Temple and the desire to restore Jewish rule in Palestine. Mystical Hekhalot literature, which related accounts of rabbis who attempted inward spiritual ascents through the seven levels of heaven, also developed during late antiquity and may have influenced religious activity and synagogue art.

14 Homily 15, Patrologiae Graecae 65, 805a

15 Law no. 65 in Amnon Linder, Jews in Imperial Roman Legislation (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1987), 398-402. This repealed earlier laws protecting synagogues (for example, ibid., nos. 46, 47) Similar laws enacted under Justinian prohibited Jews from owning Christian slaves and holding public office (ibid., nos. 56 and 64).

16 Synagogues built at this time include Beth Alpha (first quarter of the fifth century), Meroth (built in the late fourth to early fifth century, mosaic added in the mid fifth century), and Capernaum (late fifth or early sixth century). For all, see NEAEHL, passim. For Capernaum, see Magness, “Question of the Synagogue,” 18-38. As many as twenty-five synagogues were built in the Golan during the Byzantine period (see Zvi Ma’oz, “Ancient Synagogues of the Golan,” in Ancient Synagogues Revealed, Lee I. Levine, ed. [Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1981], 98-115). For the issue of Christian polemics and synagogue construction, see Lee I. Levine, The Ancient Synagogue: the First Thousand Years (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 210-14.


18 See Chapter III for discussion of Hekhalot mysticism in synagogues.
The political, societal, and religious developments in late antiquity provided a backdrop for the emergence of the synagogue as the central institution in Jewish religious life. The construction of monumental synagogues and the array of themes employed in Jewish art must be understood as a product of this multifaceted world.

1.3 GALILEAN TYPE SYNAGOGUES

The traditional synagogue chronology first proposed by Kohl and Watzinger in the early 20th century saw synagogue architecture as evolutionary, that is, that synagogues were built in a particular style until it gradually fell out of fashion and was replaced by another. Kohl and Watzinger described the earliest synagogues as Galilean type synagogues, which they dated to the second and third centuries because they employed an architectural style typical of pagan temples and public buildings in Syria. The synagogues of Capernaum and Kfar Bar’am are standard examples of Galilean type synagogues. Sukenik elaborated on Kohl and Watzinger’s typology in 1930, identifying a second category, Byzantine synagogues, which copied the style of churches of the fifth and sixth centuries. The Beth Alpha synagogue is an example of this type. Finally, in the 1950s, Goodenough and Avi-Yonah identified a third type, transitional synagogues, which are characterized by a broadhouse layout and which they dated to the forth century, intermediary between the Galilean type and Byzantine type synagogues. The Hammath Tiberias synagogue is an example of the transitional type.

19 Kohl and Watzinger, Antike Synagogen, 174-183.
Some important points should be made about the tripartite synagogue chronology. First, the dating of the chronology is based on stylistic considerations alone. Second, according to the conventional typology, the three synagogue styles were simply adaptations of building styles developed by pagans and Christians which. New evidence shows that all three types are contemporary, with Jewish communities choosing a design based on their own preferences, needs, and resources. We will explore this issue further in Chapter 3.

According to the traditional typology, these synagogues date to the 2nd-6th centuries. Changes in synagogue type have been understood as reflections of changes in the life of the Jewish population, thereby fitting interpretation to the model rather than vice versa. For instance, the chronology placed the rise and decline of purpose built synagogues in Palestine between the historical bookends of the rise of rabbinic Judaism in the 2nd and 3rd centuries and the Muslim conquest in the 7th century.

By the late 20th century, the excavation of new synagogues and redating of others forced scholars to reevaluate the validity of the traditional chronology. Much of this debate has centered on the Capernaum synagogue, considered the best example of the Galilean type. In 1968, Stanislao Loffreda and Virgilio Corbo of the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum in Jerusalem opened several trenches in and around the synagogue to gather new evidence and determine if the 3rd century dating was correct. They discovered deposits containing over 25,000 coins, which were embedded in the mortar foundation of the flagstone pavement of the hall and adjacent courtyard. Of the coins that have been identified, the latest dates to the 4th century CE.

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22 Stanislao Loffreda “Coins from the Synagogue of Capharnaum,” *Liber Annuus* 47 (1997), 223-44. Coin deposits have been discovered in at least fourteen synagogues. For the most up to date list, see Rachel Hachlili, *Ancient Synagogues- Archaeology and Art: New Discoveries and Current Research* (Boston: Brill, 2013), 540-555. The coins in these deposits are typically bronze denominations from the forth and fifth centuries that were essentially valueless because of inflation. For an overview of this phenomenon, see Gabriela Bijovsky, “Monetary Circulation in Palestine During the Byzantine Period (Fifth-Seventh Centuries CE),” (PhD diss. Hebrew University, 2011). Coin deposits have been found at several other synagogues, including Gush Halav, Meroth, and Korazin. See Eric M.
late fifth century. On the basis of coins and pottery, Loffreda and Corbo believe that the synagogue was built no earlier than the fifth century, although Magness has argued for a 6th century date.

The redating of the Capernaum synagogue demonstrates that the three synagogue styles were not confined to distinct time periods, as held by the traditional chronology. Instead, synagogues were built in all three styles concurrently. For example, when the Capernaum synagogue was built in the fifth or sixth century, it stood within a few miles of the Byzantine type synagogues at Hammath Tiberias and Horvat Kor, and the Galilean type synagogues at Khirbet Wadi Hamam and Huqoq.

To date, archaeologists have brought to light more than a dozen Galilean type synagogues throughout Upper and Lower Eastern Galilee, with a variant in the Golan. These synagogues are similar in layout and style, although each displays its own variations from the standard plan outlined below. It appears that individual communities added, subtracted, or changed features from the “standard” plan to suit their needs and tastes. The mosaics brought to light at Horvat 'Ammudim, Meroth, Wadi Hamam, and Huqoq are examples of this phenomenon.


24 Capernaum, NEAEHL vol. 1


Galilean type synagogues imitated the style of pagan temples and public buildings in the Near East. The building was rectangular, often monumental in size, and was decorated on the exterior façade with carved architectural, floral, and animal motifs. This emphasis on the building’s exterior appearance distinguishes them from Transitional and Byzantine synagogues, which had a plain exterior but a decorated interior, often with a mosaic floor. Rows of columns separated the nave from aisles on the east and west. The number of rows of columns varied. For example, the Capernaum synagogue is lined with rows of columns on three sides (east, north, and west), while the Kfar Bar’am synagogue may have been divided by four rows of columns.

Visitors entered the synagogue through a triple entryway along the Jerusalem-oriented wall (the south side in Galilee). At Capernaum, Kfar Bar’am, and Chorazin, a portico extended for several meters from the entrance. The Torah shrine and platform for reading (bema) stood along the south wall. This setup required attendees to enter the synagogue and turn 360 degrees to face the direction of prayer, although this setup was adjusted at some synagogues, including Meroth, during later renovations. The interior of Galilean type synagogues was paved with flagstones (except for the synagogues discussed in Chapeter 2). Some were lined with stone benches, while others may have used wooden benches or floor mats for seating. Some synagogues had a second floor gallery.

Decoration in Galilean type synagogues was focused on the exterior façade, particularly around the triple entryway on the south wall (Figure I). Architectural elements carved in relief, including lintels, friezes, and columns, and decorative window frames, mimicked the style of pagan temples and public buildings in the Near East. Wreaths and

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28 The doors of the Meroth synagogue were relocated to the north wall when a bema was built along the south wall in the first quarter of the 7th century. See Ilan, “The Synagogue and Study House at Meroth,” 268-70.
animals crowned the doorways, such as the wreath held by two victories above the main entrance at Capernaum. Doorways and windows were outlined with carved garlands, flowers, and shells, or with figured images such as the Medusa and putti at Chorazin (Figure II). These motifs are, of course, figured images borrowed from the pagan world. Some Galilean type synagogues are decorated with Jewish motifs, such as the wheeled Torah shrine/Tabernacle at Capernaum and a presumed Torah shrine carving at Nabratein. Lee Levine suggests that Jewish symbols were not widely used in Galilean type synagogues (as opposed to synagogues of other styles) because they were built in the predominantly-Jewish region of Upper Galilee, where there was no need to distinguish a building as Jewish.29 The use of pagan symbols in synagogue art will be discussed below in Chapter 3.

The interior walls of some synagogues were decorated with painted plaster. A dedicatory inscription at Susiya (in southern Judea) honors the donor who paid for the synagogue’s plaster walls: “May he be remembered for good, my holy teacher, my sage, Isi the priest, the honored one, son of a sage, who made this mosaic and plastered its walls.”30 Plaster was discovered on the interior of the first course of stones along the eastern aisle of the Huqoq synagogue. The synagogue at Arbel was covered with a light yellow plaster, and the natural rock face that the Meiron synagogue abutted to the west was plastered to give it a


finished appearance.\textsuperscript{31} There is also evidence that the Horvat ‘Ammudim synagogue contained plaster painted with decorations.\textsuperscript{32}

These characteristics provide the basis for discussion of Huqoq and other Galilean type synagogues. Discoveries in the last half-century have demonstrated that each building was designed to fit a community’s needs rather than conform to a model. Each new synagogue brought to light will clarify our understanding of synagogues themselves and the communities that planned, built, and used them.


CHAPTER II

THE HUQOQ SYNAGOGUE IN CONTEXT: A SUB-GROUP OF GALILEAN TYPE SYNAGOGUES WITH MOSAIC FLOORS

Archaeologists often joke that the best discoveries happen at the end of a field season, forcing them to wait another year to continue excavating. Such was the case at Huqoq, where the east wall of a Galilean type synagogue came to light on one of the last days of the June 2011 excavation season. Finding any remains of a synagogue would have been exciting, but the size and quality of these limestone ashlars made this find particularly difficult to leave behind for another year. If these stones were any indication of the building’s size, it had been monumental, comparable to the Capernaum synagogue 10 km to the east. The high quality mosaics discovered in the synagogue’s eastern aisle in 2012 and 2013 confirmed that the synagogue was high quality and that the village of Huqoq was prosperous in antiquity.

Although only a small portion of the east aisle of the Huqoq synagogue has been uncovered, the discoveries made so far have much to offer to the study of ancient synagogues and Jewish art. Huqoq is the fourth Galilean type synagogue with a mosaic floor, challenging the view that the Galilean style was decorated predominantly on the exterior and had a relatively plain interior. Two mosaic panels at Huqoq depict the biblical hero Samson. An image of Samson has only been found in one other Palestinian synagogue- Khirbet Wadi Hamam, which is located only a few miles south of Huqoq. A mosaic panel discovered at Huqoq in 2013 may
depict martyrdom traditions from the books of Maccabees, which would make it the first known depiction of an Apocryphal scene in any ancient synagogue.

This chapter will discuss the history of Huqoq and the results of the 2011-2013 excavation seasons. Then, to put the site in context, it will compare the Huqoq synagogues with the three other Galilean type synagogues with mosaic floors: Khirbet Wadi Hamam, Meroth, and Horvat ‘Ammudim (Figure III). The discovery of mosaic floors in the Horvat ‘Ammudim and Meroth synagogues in the 1970s and 1980s came as a surprise because Galilean type synagogues were believed to be paved with flagstones inside. The discoveries at Khirbet Wadi Hamam and Huqoq suggest that these four synagogues represent a sub-group of the Galilean style synagogues.

2.1 HUQOQ

The village of Huqoq is located on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee, approximately 9 km southwest of Capernaum and 7 km north of Migdal. Tiberias, the nearest urban center, lies approximately 11 km to the south. Huqoq is mentioned in Joshua 19:34 and 1 Chronicles 6:75 as belonging to the territory of the tribe of Naphtali. Several accounts in the Palestinian Talmud refer to a village called Hiqoq. In one of these accounts, Rabbi Simeon ben Lakish travels to Hiqoq and describes villagers gathering wild mustard plants:

Rabbi Shim’on ben Lakisk was in Hiqoq. He saw them gathering mustard. (Some) fell and they did not (bother) to pick it up. He said:

Matthew Grey has noted some discrepancies with the biblical identifications of Huqoq. The author of Joshua calls the site יַעֲקֹב, the Chronicler renders יֶהוּדָא and locates the site too far to the west, and the Septuagint renders its name Ἰουκώνα, which most likely refers to a different site. See Matthew Grey with Jodi Magness, “Finding Samson in Byzantine Galilee: the 2011-2012 Archaeological Excavations at Huqoq,” Studies in the Bible and Antiquity 5 (2013), 4.
whoever brings me [lit. asks me about] mustard, I will instruct like Rabbi Yehuda.\textsuperscript{34}

During the Middle Ages, Jewish pilgrims passed by Huqoq on their way to the supposed tomb of Habbakuk, which lies to the north of the site. One of these pilgrims, Estori ha-Parhi (writing in 1316-1322), visited Huqoq and recalled, “we saw there the ancient synagogue floor”\textsuperscript{35}

The village of Huqoq is located on the top of a hill surrounded by cisterns, wine and olive presses, cist graves, and rock cut tombs.\textsuperscript{36} A perennial spring at the foot of the hill supplied the village with water. Pottery and other small finds indicate that Huqoq was occupied as early as the Bronze Age, corroborating the literary sources discussed above.\textsuperscript{37} At some point after the Byzantine period, the village became Muslim and its name changed to Yakuk.\textsuperscript{38} The Palestinian village of Yakuk, built on the remains of ancient Huqoq, existed through the Ottoman and Mandate periods, and was abandoned in 1948.\textsuperscript{39} The site was bulldozed by the Israel Defense Forces in the 1960s.\textsuperscript{40} The bulldozed remains of the modern village cover approximately 1/3 of the area of ancient Huqoq, including the synagogue.

\textsuperscript{34} Y Shevi’it 9:1, 38c. Translation from Uzi Leibner, \textit{Settlement Patterns in Hellenistic, Roman, and Byzantine Galilee}, (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 153. See also Y Sanhedrin 3:10, 21d, which mentions a sage named Rabbi Hizkiyah of Huqoq.

\textsuperscript{35} Caftor va-pherach por Estori ha-Parchi, I-II. A. M. Luncz, ed. (Jerusalem, 1897-99), 285.

\textsuperscript{36} Bezalel Ravani conducted excavations of some of the rock cut tombs with loculi surrounding the site in the late 1950s. The tombs contained remains in primary and secondary (ossuary) burial, as well as grave goods (pottery, beads, and glass vessels). See Ravani, “Rock-Cut Tombs at Huqoq,” \textit{Atiqot} 3 (1961), 121-47.

\textsuperscript{37} Ravani reports Bronze and Iron Age pottery in his survey of Huqoq (see below, note 43). The current excavations are focused on the late Roman/Byzantine periods, so no attempt has been made to analyze earlier occupation periods in depth.


\textsuperscript{39} ibid., 7

Huqoq was visited by European explorers in the 19th century and was documented in a survey of the region commissioned by the Palestine Exploration Fund in the 1870s-80s. After the site was bulldozed, it stood abandoned for several decades. Bezalel Ravani of the Israel Antiquities Authority surveyed the site from 1956-57, collecting surface pottery dating from the Early Bronze Age through the Medieval period. Ravani also excavated two burial caves north of the site containing three ossuaries from the late first-early second century CE.

The current excavations at Huqoq are directed by Jodi Magness of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and are planned to continue through 2016-2017. The goals of the project are to excavate and date the synagogue in order to clarify the dating of ancient synagogues, to excavate buildings from the village to provide context for the synagogue, and to determine the history of Yakuk using archaeological and ethnographic data. In 2011, part of the synagogue’s east wall was located, and in the course of the following seasons the excavators discovered portions of a high quality mosaic floor. Pottery and coins found in the foundation trench of the synagogue provide a terminus post quem of the early fifth century for the building’s construction, although further excavation should provide a more precise date.


42 Unfortunately, Ravani’s survey was never published. A summary of his findings from Huqoq can be found in Uzi Leibner, Settlement and History in Hellenistic, Roman, and Byzantine Galilee: An Archaeological Survey of the Eastern Galilee (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 151-5.


44 Magness is joined by assistant co-director Shua Kisilevitz of the Israel Antiquities Authority. Chad Spigel (Trinity University, TX) is the supervisor of excavations in the ancient village, Matthew Grey (Brigham Young University) is the supervisor in the synagogue area, and Brian Coussens, with the help of Tawfiq De’adle (Hebrew University), is the assistant area supervisor of the modern village.

Thus far, excavations have uncovered part of the synagogue’s east aisle and a portion of the southern wall, which is abutted by a bema. The mosaic in the aisle was comprised of a series of panels divided by *guillouche* (braided ribbon) strips. Some of the panels inward toward the nave (west) and others face the walls (east). Huqoq, Wadi Hamam, and Meroth are the only known synagogues with figured scenes in the aisles as opposed to geometric designs, which are more common. All of the Wadi Hamam scenes face inward, and the Meroth mosaic is so fragmentary that the orientations of the panels is unclear.\(^{46}\)

Two patches of figured mosaic were discovered in the eastern aisle in 2012. The first is an inscription written in white tesserae on a black medallion, flanked by two female faces (Figure IV).\(^{47}\) It appears to be a dedicatory inscription, written in Hebrew or Aramaic, and was reconstructed in Hebrew by David Amit as follows:\(^{48}\)

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And blessed [Ήρωι]  שַׁמֶּן קַר הָבָל כָּל בִּכְלֵי [דֶּשֶּׁק] מַחְתָּה יִדָּא מַמְלֶכֶת [הָיָ] [לַשָּׁן] וַאמֶרֶס [וּמְלַכָּן]
[אָמָ] [לְשָׁנָה] P|eace
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The busts of two unidentified women framed by black nimbi flank the inscription. Most of the figure on the right is preserved, but only part of the forehead and hair of the figure to the left of the inscription remain. Despite the poor state of preservation it is clear that the two women are

\(^{46}\) Both panels featuring Samson face the nave (west), while the dedicator inscription and the panel possibly containing scenes from the books of Maccabees face outward (east). In order to properly view the panels oriented east, one would have to stand against the east wall.

\(^{47}\) Karen Britt, “Mosaics Discovered in the Late Antique Synagogue at Huqoq, Lower Galilee,” 4. I am grateful to the author for providing me a copy of this unpublished article.

not identical; the figure on the right wears her hair down, while the figure on the left wears hers in a high bun.

There is no inscription indicating the women’s identities. Karen Britt, the excavation’s mosaics specialist, has suggested that they may be portraits of female donors.49 While many Byzantine churches contained portraits of female donors, however, no donor portraits, male or female, have ever been found in any ancient synagogue.50 Alternatively, the women may be personifications of the seasons, indicated by the floral motifs that emerge from the nimbi around their heads.51 This would also be unusual, however, because no other depictions of the seasons have nimbi and because the seasons are usually found in mosaics surrounding the zodiac wheel in the nave, not adjacent to inscriptions.52 A third possibility is that the women are victories (Nikae), which are frequently depicted flanking similar embossed shields, however victories are always portrayed as identical figures.53

The second mosaic scene discovered in 2012 preserves the bottom half of a man in military dress standing next to two pairs of foxes (Figure V). The man is disproportionately larger than

49 Britt, “Mosaics Discovered,” 5.

50 If the women are donors, then this is the first depiction of any donor, male or female, in an ancient synagogue. Women (and men) are attested, however, in synagogue dedicatory inscriptions. For example, an inscription in the aisle of the Sepphoris mosaic reads: “Remembered be for good Yudan son of Isaac the Priest and Parigri his daughter. Amen. Amen.” These inscriptions indicate that women were active members of Galilean Jewish communities. For the Sepphoris inscription, see Ze’ev Weiss, Sephoris Synagogue: Deciphering an Ancient Message through its Archaeological and Socio-Historical Contexts (Jerusalem, 2005), 204. Female donor portraits are also attested in churches. The female donor portraits in the northern chapel of the Church of Amos and Kasiseus at Khirbet el-Mukhayyat in Jordan (6th century), Britt notes, bear a strong resemblance to the Huqoq portraits. In both instances, the portraits are busts, the women’s heads are framed by nimbi, and they are adorned with jewelry. For further discussion of this similarity, see Britt, “Mosaics Discovered,” 11. For the Khirbet el-Mukhayyat mosaics, see Michelle Piccirillo, The Mosaics of Jordan (Amman: ACOR, 1993), 288-9.

51 Britt, “Mosaics Discovered,” 13

52 ibid. Additionally, the seasons typically hold or are surrounded by seasonal crops, for example the Hammath Tiberias seasons. This is not the case at Huqoq.

the foxes, indicating that he is a giant. He is dressed in a red cloak, red belt, and blue tunic adorned with orbiculi- apotropaic symbols used to ward off evil- at the knees. The pairs of foxes are tied at their tails to a flaming torch. Such unique imagery leaves no doubt that this is a depiction of Samson exacting vengeance on the Philistines from Judges 15:1-5:

Samson said to them, ‘This time, when I do mischief to the Philistines, I will be without blame.’ So Samson went at caught three hundred foxes, and took some torches; and he turned the foxes tail to tail, and put a torch between each pair of tails. When he had set fire to the torches, he let the foxes go into the standing grain of the Philistines, and burned up the shocks and the standing grain, as well as the vineyards and the olive groves.

A second scene depicting Samson was discovered in 2013 in a square in the southeast of the aisle (Figure VI). Here, Samson is portrayed holding a set of gates flanked by towers on his shoulders. Samson is portrayed as a young man with short, red-brown hair. Hoisting the gates of Gaza above his head, his eyes look north towards an object or person that has not been preserved. Below and to the left, a young man on a horse looks at him anxiously, as if he is turning to flee. The scene can be identified as Judges 16:1-3:

Once Samson went Gaza, where he saw a prostitute and went in to her. The Gazites were told, ‘Samson has come here,’ so they encircled the place and lay in wait for him all night at the city gate. They kept quiet all night, thinking, ‘Let us wait until the light of the morning; then we will kill him.’ But Samson lay only until midnight. Then at midnight he rose up, took hold of the doors of the city gate and the two posts,

54 Britt, “Mosaics Discovered,” 15-16.
55 ibid., 16
56 ibid., 15
57 All biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version.
59 ibid.
60 ibid.
pulled them up, bar and all, put them on his shoulders, and carried them to the top of the hill that is in front of Hebron.

Interestingly, the depictions of Samson at Huqoq do not follow his physical description in the biblical accounts. At Huqoq, Samson is depicted with short red-brown hair, whereas in Judges 13, he is said to be a Nazirite who is forbidden to cut his hair:

There was a certain man of Zorah, of the tribe of the Danites, whose name was Manoah. His wife was barren, having borne no children. And the angel of the Lord appeared to her and said to her, “Although you are barren, having borne no children, you shall conceive and bear a son. Now, be careful not to drink wine or strong drink, or to eat anything unclean, for you shall conceive and bear a son. No razor is to come on his head, for the boy shall be a nazirite.”

When Delilah cuts Samson’s hair in Judges 16:19, he loses his strength and is captured by the Philistines: “She let him fall asleep on her lap; and she called a man and had him shave off the seven locks of his head. He began to weaken, and his strength left him.” Additionally, Samson is portrayed as a giant in the Huqoq mosaics, although he is never described as such in Judges. The depiction of Samson at Huqoq most likely follows a non-biblical tradition that viewed him as a giant. A passage in the Babylonian Talmud states that Samson’s shoulders were sixty cubits wide (making them wide enough to bear the gates of Gaza), providing further evidence of this tradition.

A final panel discovered in the north of the east aisle in 2013 depicts a scene that does not appear to be from the Hebrew Bible (Figure VII). The scene continues into the baulks, so it is possible that further excavation will clarify its meaning. The portion of the panel is divided into three horizontal registers framed with a wavy ribbon border. In the top register, extending into the western baulk, are four figures in white robes and brown boots facing two elephants covered

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61 Judges 13:2-5

62 B Sotah 10a. See also discussion in Britt, “Mosaics Discovered,” 19.
in armor and an animal with cloven hooves. The figure second from the left carries a short sword or dagger with blood on the blade. The figure closest to the elephant has darker skin than the others and is dressed like a soldier with a cuirass. His tunic is decorated with a red and orange flame design at the hem, while the other men wear plain white tunics.

The middle register depicts young men and an old man framed in an arcade. Only six figures are preserved, but the original image may have been symmetrical, with four young men on either side of the old man. The young men hold scrolls and turn to the center of the arcade to face the old man, who is enthroned and holds a scroll. An oil lamp rests on the top of the arcade above each figure. Below the arcade lie the body of a man in armor, pierced by a spear, and bull pierced in the side by three spears.

Scholarly analysis of this mosaic has just begun, and the limited amount of the mosaic that has been excavated restricts what can be said about it. Matthew Grey and Chad Spigel have proposed that the scene is a conflation of Macabean martyrdom traditions. The books of Macabees contain stories about battles involving war elephants, as well as stories of Jewish

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64 ibid.
65 ibid.
66 ibid.
67 ibid., 32
68 ibid.
69 ibid.
70 ibid., 39
71 Matthew Grey and Chad Spigel, “Noble Death and Divine Deliverance: the Huqoq Mosaic and the Veneration of the Maccabees in Late Antiquity,” 2. I am grateful to the authors for providing me a copy of this unpublished article.
martyrdoms.\footnote{See discussion in Chapter III} Scholars traditionally have believed that Christian circles were the first to develop traditions venerating the Macabean martyrs, but Grey and Spigel suggest that the Huqoq mosaic may indicate that Jewish communities were also interested in these traditions.\footnote{Grey and Spigel, “Noble Death,” 32.} If this is the case, this discovery has important implications for the study of Judaism in late antiquity. The fact that Apocryphal stories were used along side biblical stories in the Huqoq mosaic would affect our understanding of the authority of non-canonical texts during late antiquity.

2.2 HORVAT ‘AMMUDIM

Horvat ‘Ammudim is located at the eastern end of the Bar Netofa Valley 15 km northwest of Tiberias. In 1979, Lee I. Levine of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem conducted excavations in the synagogue.\footnote{Levine, “Excavations at the Synagogue of Horvat ‘Ammudim,” 1-12. Lee Levine, “Horvat Ammudim,” \textit{NEAEHL} vol. 1, 55-6.} The synagogue follows the standard Galilean style, with a triple entryway on the south side and rows of columns on the east, west, and north sides of the hall.\footnote{Levine, “Excavations,” 2} The hall was paved with a mosaic floor, much of which has been destroyed, possibly in the course of looting.\footnote{ibid., 5} Based on the remains, it appears to have consisted of a white background with colored geometric designs in the aisles.\footnote{ibid., 6} A dedicatory inscription in Aramaic framed in a medallion was discovered in the western aisle facing south.\footnote{ibid., 8} In addition to the mosaic floor,
pieces of painted plaster turned up in the course of excavation, indicating that the walls were decorated with colorful designs.\(^79\)

Levine concluded that the synagogue was built in the late third or early fourth century based on four bronze coins found under the mosaic floor, and was abandoned in the late fourth or early fifth century, based on pottery in the fill immediately above the mosaic.\(^80\) His findings were corroborated by David Adan-Bayewitz who published the pottery from the site. Adan-Bayewitz identified fragments of Kefar Hananya (Galilean bowls) Form 1E in sealed loci below the floor of the synagogue and fragments of Forms 1C, 1D, and 1E in unsealed loci below the floor.\(^81\) Galilean bowls are among the most common types of pottery found in late Roman and Byzantine sites in the region.\(^82\) Recently, Jodi Magness has argued that these forms have been dated too early because of their association with coins from the third and fourth centuries that remained in circulation long after their minting date.\(^83\) According to Magness, Kefar Hananya Forms 1C and 1D continued to be produced through the fourth century and Form 1E was produced until the late fifth century.\(^84\) The presence of these pottery types below the synagogue floor at Horvat ‘Ammudim indicates that the building was constructed no earlier than the fourth century.\(^85\) This issue also affects the dating of the Wadi Hamam synagogue (see below).

\(^79\) ibid., 3
\(^80\) ibid., 11
\(^82\) Jodi Magness, “Did Jewish Settlement Collapse in the Mid Fourth Century?” 3. I am grateful to Professor Magness for providing me a copy of this unpublished paper.
\(^84\) ibid.
2.3 MEROOTH

The ancient village of Meroth is located in Upper Galilee on the western slope of the Hulah Valley, approximately 7 km north of Safed. The site was excavated in the 1980s by Zvi Ilan of the Israel Antiquities Authority. The synagogue at Meroth stands on the high point of the settlement. It is built of ashlar stones, some of which are decorated with the carved reliefs characteristic of Galilean type synagogues. The synagogue is oriented north-south and the southern entrance leads to a portico that extends the length of the southern wall. A triple entrance in the southern wall provided access to the nave, along with a second, smaller doorway in the eastern wall.

The synagogue is flanked to the south by a courtyard with a cistern that was part of a network of six cisterns under the southeast corner of the synagogue and the portico, which were connected with passageways. These underground rooms yielded pottery and coins from the second to fifth centuries. During the Bar Kokhba revolt, Jewish communities in Galilee and Judea dug underground hiding complexes to provide shelter in case of Roman attacks. If the


87 Ilan, “The Synagogue and Study House,” 256.

88 ibid., 257

89 ibid.

90 ibid.

91 ibid., 259

92 ibid., 259

93 Underground hiding complexes have been found at over 100 sites in Judea and Galilee. These complexes were built by connecting existing underground structures such as cisterns, storage chambers, and quarries with
cisterns were used during the Jewish revolts, they predate the synagogue by a considerable amount of time. It remains to be explained why the synagogue was built above the cisterns rather than on solid ground. Additionally, there is the question of the pottery and coins of the fifth century found in the cisterns. These may have simply been dropped into the cistern accidentally, or may be evidence of continued use of the cisterns, whether for storage, hiding, or another purpose.

At some point, the synagogue fell into disuse and the mosaic floor was destroyed, leaving only two patches of tesserae. The first is a cluster of grapes in the north part of the east aisle and the second, found in the north part of the west aisle, included the upper half of a man dressed as a Roman soldier surrounded by a gillouche frame. The figure wears a tunic decorated with orbicui at the knees and cinched at the waist with a red belt, and a red cloak

tunnels to create a network of hiding spaces under a settlement. The entrances to these complexes were camouflaged at ground level and, once inside, access was controlled with locking mechanisms, false doors, and sharp turns. Many complexes had access to cisterns so that villagers could access water without going above ground. According to Boaz Zissu and Amos Kloner, most hiding complexes were built immediately before or during the Bar Kokhba Revolt (132-136 CE) (Zissu and Kloner, “The Archaeology of the Second Jewish Revolt Against Rome [the Bar Kokhba Revolt]: Some New Insights,” Bollettino di Archeologia [Special volume, International Congress of Classical Archaeology, 2008], 41). The Roman historian Cassius Dio, whose Roman History provides one of the few written accounts of the revolt, mentions that Jews hid from the Romans in underground complexes: “To be sure, they [the Jews] did not date try conclusions with the Romans in the open fields, but they occupied the advantageous positions in the country and strengthened them with mines and walls, in order that they might have places of refuge whenever they should be hard pressed, and might meet together unobserved under ground; and they pierced these subterranean passages from above at intervals to let in air and light,” (Earnest Cary trans., Roman History 69: 12-14 [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1925]). It is difficult, however, to determine when hiding complexes were built because they made use of previously existing structures. For issues with dating, see Amos Kloner, “Underground Hiding Complexes from the Bar Kokhba War in the Judea Shephelah,” The Biblical Archaeologist 46.4 (Dec., 1983), 218-9. For hiding complexes specifically in Galilee, see Yuval Shahar, “The Underground Hideouts in Galilee and Their Historical Meaning,” in The Bar Kokhba War Reconsidered: New Perspectives on the Second Jewish Revolt Against Rome, ed. Peter Shäfer (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2003), 217-40.

95 ibid., 261
96 ibid., 262
97 ibid.
fastened with a circular *fibula* at his left shoulder.\(^98\) His hair is cut short, and is colored with alternating swirls of red and black tesserae that suggest waves or curls.\(^99\) The figure reclines to his right against a shield in 2/3 profile and extends his hands, which have been destroyed, making it impossible to know what he held.\(^100\) A gold helmet sits to the left of his head and a sword in its scabbard lies to the right.\(^101\) A dedicatory inscription was found south of the figure, but it does not provide any information about his identity.\(^102\)

Ilan, following Yadin,\(^103\) identified the figure as David surrounded by Goliath’s armor.\(^104\) If this were the case, however, we would expect the armor to be disproportionately larger than the figure to demonstrate that it belonged to a giant. This artistic technique is attested at other synagogues in Galilee. In the Huqoq mosaics, for example, Samson dwarfs the gates of Gaza and the pairs of foxes, making it clear that he is a giant (see above), and in the scene of Samson smiting the Philistines at Wadi Hamam (see below), Samson is large enough to hold Philistine soldiers in his hands. Alternatively, the mosaic may depict David with Saul’s armor. In I Samuel 17, King Saul gives David his armor to wear while he fights Goliath, but David refuses to accept it:

> Then Saul dressed David in his own tunic. He put a coat of armor on him and a bronze helmet on his head. David fastened on his sword over the tunic and tried walking around, because he was not used to

\(^{98}\) ibid.  
\(^{99}\) ibid.  
\(^{101}\) Ilan, “The Synagogue and Study House,” 262.  
\(^{102}\) ibid., 264  
\(^{103}\) ibid., Ilan mentions that Yadin identified the mosaic as David but does not provide a reference.  
\(^{104}\) ibid., 266
them. ‘I cannot go in these,’ he said to Saul, ‘because I am not used to them.’

It is also possible, however, that the mosaic does not depict David at all. Church and synagogue art, including the Gaza synagogue mosaic and Dura synagogue frescoes, typically portray David as Orpheus playing the lyre for a group of animals, while the figure from Meroth is dressed like a Roman soldier and is surrounded by weapons and armor. The David at Gaza wears a crown and has a nimbus, neither of which appear at Meroth. Britt notes that the Meroth figure is proportionately too large for the frame, indicating that he is a giant with a giant’s armor. These similarities suggest that the Meroth figure should be identified as Samson. If this is correct, it indicates that communities outside of Lower Eastern Galilee may have also had an interest in the hero because of his association with apocalyptic traditions (see below).

Ilan determined that the synagogue was built in three phases. The phase IA synagogue was built in the late fourth or early fifth century and had a plaster floor and painted plaster walls. The mosaic floor was added in phase IB during the second half of the fifth century, but was damaged, possibly by fire, at the end of the fifth century. The synagogue was renovated in

105 I Sam. 38-39
109 ibid.
111 ibid., 260
112 ibid., 261
the early sixth century (phase II), when the community chose to cover the mosaic with a new polished stone floor.\textsuperscript{113} Finally, the southern entrances were blocked and new doors cut into the northern wall during the first quarter of the seventh century.\textsuperscript{114} The synagogue remained in use in this state into the twelfth century, evidenced by an Ayyubid coin from 1193 found in the synagogue treasury, a hollowed out stone found under the floor of the storeroom adjacent to the synagogue hall.\textsuperscript{115}

2.4 KHIRBET WADI HAMAM

The village of Khirbet Wadi Hamam lies on the eastern slope of Wadi Arbel, 2 km west of the Sea of Galilee. The site was excavated from 2007-2009 by Uzi Leibner of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.\textsuperscript{116} The excavations exposed the several domestic structures and a Galilean type synagogue built of basalt.\textsuperscript{117} The synagogue has only one entrance on the southern wall (rather than a triple doorway), and is not oriented precisely north-south because of the steep slope.\textsuperscript{118} Unfortunately, many elements of the synagogue have been lost, either because they were robbed out or washed into the wadi by rain. Rain also washed modern material into the synagogue area, making it difficult to find uncontaminated stratigraphy for dating purposes.

\textsuperscript{113} ibid., 267
\textsuperscript{114} ibid., 268
\textsuperscript{115} ibid., 272-4
\textsuperscript{117} ibid., 228
\textsuperscript{118} ibid.
Based on pottery from the synagogue’s eastern foundation trench and a coin embedded in the plaster floor of the western aisle, Leibner dates the synagogue’s construction to the late third or early fourth century.\(^{119}\) At some point in the fourth century, the mosaic floor was severely damaged, possibly by the earthquake of 363. At this time, the damaged mosaic was patched with plaster and a *bema* was built against the south wall. According to Leibner, by the time this destruction occurred, the community had lost the means to repair or replace the mosaic, so it was patched with plaster, leaving the remaining disjointed fragments of mosaic in place.\(^{120}\) Four coins from the fill of the *bema* indicate that these renovations were completed in the mid to late fourth century.\(^{121}\) Within a few decades the village was abandoned and the synagogue building collapsed, possibly during an earthquake.\(^{122}\) Based on pottery and coins sealed under the collapse, Leibner concluded that the synagogue was destroyed in the late fourth or early fifth century, as part of a general decline in Galilee.\(^{123}\)

Magness has challenged Leibner’s dating, proposing instead that the synagogue was built during the fourth century and continued in use through the fifth century.\(^{124}\) She rejects Leibner’s theory that Galilee experienced a decline in the fifth century, arguing that this belief is based on a misinterpretation of the lack of fifth century coins found in excavations in the region.\(^{125}\) Due to

\(^{119}\) ibid., 230-232.

\(^{120}\) This theory fits well with Leibner’s belief that settlement in Galilee began to decline in the mid fourth century. Uzi Leibner and Shulamit Miller, “A Figural Mosaic in the Synagogue at Khirbet Wadi Hamam,” *JRA* 23 (2010), 238.

\(^{121}\) Leibner, “Wadi Hamam,” 232.

\(^{122}\) ibid., 230

\(^{123}\) ibid., 320


\(^{125}\) Magness, “Did Galilee Experience a Settlement Crisis in the Mid-Fourth Century?” in *Jewish Identities in Late Antiquity: Studies in Memory of Menachem Stern* (Tübingen: Morh Siebeck, 2009), 296-313.
the decrease in coins minted during the fifth century, older coins from the fourth century remained in circulation.\textsuperscript{126} This has affected the dating of key pottery types including Kefar Hananya (Galilean bowls) Forms 1C, 1D, and 1E, which Leibner used to date the Wadi Hamam synagogue.\textsuperscript{127} Magness believes that these pottery types have been dated too early based on their association with third and fourth century coins that circulated long after their minting date.\textsuperscript{128} Thus, the absence of fifth century coins and the misdating of later pottery have led archaeologists to date many sites, including synagogues, to the third and fourth centuries rather than later.\textsuperscript{129} According to Magness’ dating, the Wadi Hamam synagogue is roughly contemporary with the Huqoq, Meroth, and Horvat ‘Ammudim synagogues, which also belong to the sub-group of Galilean type synagogues with mosaic floors.

Leibner and Miller reconstructed the general plan of the mosaic using the 30 preserved fragments.\textsuperscript{130} The mosaic is divided into two parts: a carpet mosaic in the nave and a separate series of scenes in the aisles.\textsuperscript{131} Very little of the nave mosaic has survived. A cluster of fragments in the center of the nave contain the remains of two concentric circles which may be

\textsuperscript{126} This phenomenon has been studied by numismatist Gabriella Bijovsky. See Bijovsky, \textit{Monetary Circulation in Palestine During the Byzantine Period (Fifth – Seventh centuries CE)}, (PhD Dissertation, Hebrew University), Jerusalem, 2011: 60-2.


\textsuperscript{128} Magness, “The Pottery from the Village of Capernaum,” 241-2.

\textsuperscript{129} ibid.

\textsuperscript{130} Leibner and Miller, “A Figural Mosaic,” 238-41.

\textsuperscript{131} ibid., 239
from a zodiac circle, although the evidence is too limited to be certain. More mosaics survive in the aisles, which appear to contain twelve framed panels, four of which are preserved to some extent.

The northernmost panel in the east aisle is badly damaged, with only a portion of an Aramaic dedicatory inscription in black tesserae on a white background preserved. A second panel to the south depicts a group of craftsmen next to a structure of brick or stone. A pair of porters scale a scaffold next to the building, carrying a heavy load hung with ropes from a pole that is balanced on their shoulders. Leibner offers four possible identifications of the scene: Israelite slaves working in Egypt, the construction of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11, workers building fortifications around Jerusalem, or the construction of Solomon’s Temple in 1 Kings 5-6. He favors the fourth option, noting that Temple motifs, such as the menorah, shofar, and incense shovel, as well as scenes that allude to the Temple like the Binding of Isaac, are common in ancient synagogues. If so, this is the first known depiction of the Temple itself found in any ancient synagogue.

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132 ibid., 240
133 ibid., 239
134 ibid., 241
135 ibid., 241-6
136 ibid., 242
137 ibid., 246-9
138 ibid., 249
139 ibid., 246-9
Two additional panels were discovered in the western aisle. The southern most panel in the aisle depicts the crossing of the Red Sea from Exodus 14-15. The next panel to the north depicts a giant figure holding two men by the hair with his left hand. Much of the panel is damaged, but from what is preserved it is clear that the men are much smaller than the central figure, indicating that he is a giant. Two dead men lie between the giant’s feet, and a third escapes on horseback to his left. Leibner originally suggested that this panel depicted Samson or Goliath, but the discovery of the Samson mosaic at Huqoq confirms that it depicts Samson smiting the Philistines as portrayed in Judges 15:15-17.

Then he found a fresh jawbone of a donkey, reached down, and with it he killed a thousand men. And Samson said, ‘With the jawbone of a donkey, heaps upon heaps, with the jawbone of a donkey I have slain a thousand men.’

2.5 CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SUB-GROUP

The four synagogues discussed above constitute a sub-group of Galilean type synagogues based on their architectural similarities. The designation “sub-group” is not meant to imply a relationship between the sites (e.g. that the synagogues were modeled after one another or after a specific style), but rather is a means of distinguishing them from other Galilean type synagogues based on their architectural characteristics.

The distinguishing characteristic of this sub-group is a mosaic floor with a carpet design in the nave (possibly including a zodiac wheel) and panels with scenes in the aisles. In

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140 ibid., 257-9
141 ibid., 249
142 ibid.
143 ibid., 251
144 ibid., 252
other synagogues with mosaic floors (Sepphoris, Hammath Tiberias, and Beth Alpha, for example), the nave is decorated with figured images while the aisles are decorated with simpler geometric designs and dedicatory inscriptions (Sepphoris). The four synagogues in this sub-group are the only buildings known to contain scenes in the aisles. The panels portray scenes from the Hebrew Bible (“David” at Meroth, the crossing of the Red Sea at Wadi Hamam, Samson at Huqoq and Wadi Hamam), with the exception of the Maccabees panel at Huqoq.¹⁴⁵

There is also evidence suggesting that the synagogues in the sub-group were roughly contemporary. Evidence thus far indicates that the Huqoq synagogue was built no earlier than the early fifth century. Similarly, the Meroth synagogue was built no earlier than the late fourth or early fifth century. Although the Wadi Hamam and Horvat ‘Ammudim synagogues have been dated to the late third to early fourth centuries, the dating of the pottery used to establish this has been called into question. Following Magness’ redating of certain pottery types, specifically Kefar Hananya Forms 1C-E, these buildings appear to have been built no earlier than the late fourth century, placing the construction of the synagogues in the sub-group firmly within the fourth and fifth centuries.

The similarities of these four synagogues prompt several questions. First, if the buildings are roughly contemporary, what accounts for their architectural similarities? It is possible that one of the four synagogues served as a model for the others, although the similar dating for all four buildings, along with the poor preservation of the group generally, make it difficult to determine which one/s served in this capacity. Alternatively, the synagogues could have been modeled after another earlier building which has not survived or been excavated. The similar

¹⁴⁵ This raises the question of what texts were considered ‘biblical’ by different populations in late antiquity. The fact that the Maccabees mosaic appears next to the Samson mosaics at Huqoq suggests that the community viewed the Maccabees stories as having similar authority or importance as stories from the texts that today comprise the Hebrew Bible.
choice of imagery at each site indicates, however, that the communities at Huqoq, Horvat ‘Ammudim, Meroth, and Wadi Hamam shared an interest in the heroes of the biblical past, connected with apocalyptic expectations.

In his analysis of the Samson imagery at Huqoq, Matthew Grey suggests that Jews in Lower Eastern Galilee had an interest in Samson because of his portrayal as a messianic prototype in liturgical and apocalyptic literature. Grey argues that Jews living in the vicinity of Tiberias and Mt. Arbel maintained an apocalyptic worldview and thus were interested in Samson as one of many biblical heroes who God had used in the past to redeem Israel. The possible identification of the Samson mosaic at Meroth indicates that these beliefs were not limited to Lower Eastern Galilee. Grey’s compilation of apocalyptic traditions that center on Lower Eastern Galilee raises the question of whether similar traditions also existed to the north. Additionally, it is unlikely that the Meroth synagogue was the only synagogue in Upper Galilee with these features, which suggests that there are more synagogues, particularly in the area north of Huqoq and south of Meroth, which may also belong to the sub-group. Further excavation at Huqoq, along with a revisiting of old material and exploration of new sites will help answer these questions and clarify the geographic extent of this sub-group of synagogues.

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147 ibid., 24-6.
CHAPTER III
THE HUQOQ MOSAICS: IMAGERY AND FUNCTION

The modern study of Jewish art originated in response to the discovery of ancient synagogues with mosaic floors and frescos in the early 20th century. In 1920, British troops digging defense trenches stumbled upon the ruins of a synagogue at Dura Europos, a frontier city in eastern Syria that changed hands between Rome and Parthia before its destruction in 256 CE. The building yielded magnificent frescos featuring an array of biblical scenes in the same style as the wall paintings in a nearby church and Mithraeum. Here was evidence not only of a Jewish artistic tradition, but one influenced by Dura Europos’ diverse population.\footnote{C. H. Kraeling, \textit{The Excavations at Dura-Europos. Final Report: the Synagogue}, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956).} Less than a decade later, kibbutzniks digging an irrigation channel discovered the Beth Alpha synagogue and uncovered a surprise: the synagogue’s mosaic floor featured an array of imagery, including Helios and the signs of the zodiac next to depictions of the Binding of Isaac and a Torah shrine.\footnote{Eleazar Lipa Sukenik, \textit{The Ancient Synagogue of Beth Alpha: An Account of the Excavations Conducted on Behalf of the Hebrew University, Jerusalem} (New York: Georg Olms, 1975).}

This chapter will discuss the Huqoq mosaics and their contributions to the study of Jewish art and our understanding of Jewish communities in Lower Eastern Galilee during the Late Roman and Byzantine periods. First, we will briefly review the diverse scholarly opinions on
synagogue mosaics. Then we will examine the two major motifs used in the portions of the mosaic which have been excavated - Samson and the Maccabean martyrs - and the messages these images may convey in light of contemporary political and social conditions in Galilee in the late Roman and Byzantine periods. Finally, we will return to the sub-group of Galilean synagogues with mosaic floors discussed in Chapter II and explore how the proposed later dating of Galilean type synagogues influences our understanding of the role of mosaic floors within synagogue space.

3.1 SCHOLARSHIP ON SYNAGOGUE MOSAICS

The discovery of ancient synagogues with figured mosaics challenged the conventional view that Jewish art was strictly aniconic, in accordance with the second commandment and many rabbinic injunctions. Commenting on the second commandment, the Mekhilta of R. Ishmael opposes figured imagery in any medium: "'You shall not make a sculptured image' (Ex. 20:4). One should not make on that is engraved, but perhaps one may make on that is solid? Scripture says: 'Nor any likeness.'"\(^{150}\) The Mishnah 'Avodah Zarah also addresses this concern but takes a less severe stance:

[If] one finds objects bearing the figure of the sun or the figure of the moon [and] the figure of a dragon, he must cast them into the Salt Sea (get rid of them). R. Simeon ben Gamaliel says: "If the objects are of value they are forbidden; if they are worthless, they are permitted."\(^{151}\)


\(^{151}\) All citations use the Soncino Talmud.
Many scholars have since revisited this issue and concluded that rabbinic attitudes toward figured art varied depending on time and location.\textsuperscript{152} While some rabbinic circles opposed the use of images in art, the Targum Pseudo-Jonathan (7\textsuperscript{th}–8\textsuperscript{th} century) permits figured pavements (mosaics) as long as the images are not worshipped:

‘You shall not make idols for yourselves; you shall not erect for yourselves images or pillars to bow down (to them), and you shall not set up a figured stone in your land to bend down to it.’ However, you may put up a pavement decorated with figures and images in the floors of your sanctuaries, but not to bow down to it. ‘For I am the Lord your God.’\textsuperscript{153}

The elaborately carved stone sarcophagi from the necropolis at Beth She’arim, where Tannaitic leaders including Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi, the compiler of the Mishnah, were buried also suggests that some rabbinic groups did not oppose figural art, at least in a funerary context. The sarcophagi and burial caves at Beth She’arim are decorated with an array of images, including menorahs, animals, and pagan images such as Ledah and the swan.\textsuperscript{154}

The discoveries at Dura Europos, Beth Alpha, and a growing number of other synagogues prompted scholars to rethink not only their understanding of Jewish art, but also the nature of late antique Jewish society in general. If Jewish art did not emerge from a rabbinic milieu, what were its origins? How much authority did the rabbis actually possess, and what other groups exercised influence at the time? These issues aside, what was the purpose of synagogue art, and how was Jewish and pagan imagery understood in the “sacred” context of a synagogue?

\textsuperscript{152} For an overview of rabbinic attitudes of art, see Steven Fine, \textit{Art and Judaism in the Greco-Roman World: Toward a New Jewish Archaeology} (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 97-123.


\textsuperscript{154} Nachman Avigad, \textit{Beth She’arim 3}, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1976), 42-65.
Over the last century, scholars have grappled with these questions and arrived at different answers. Some continue to view synagogue art through a rabbinic lens, believing that the rabbis exercised considerable influence on Jewish daily life in antiquity, while others see synagogue art as influenced by other factors such as Jewish mysticism or interaction and conflict with Christianity.\footnote{155} Scholars have also explored the purpose of synagogue art, its possible connection to liturgy, and its use in creating and delineating sacred space.\footnote{156} The diversity of synagogue art over space and time, however, suggests that there is no single explanation for this phenomenon.\footnote{157} Instead, synagogue art expressed the beliefs, worldviews, and preferences of individual Jewish communities.\footnote{158} The aniconic synagogue at ‘Ein Gedi, the mingling of eastern and western influences in the Dura Europos frescoes, and the possible portrayal of Maccabean martyrs at Huqoq, for example, emerged from different cultural conditions and reflect the diversity of the communities that produced them. Although some motifs appear in more than one synagogue - temple imagery, biblical stories such as the Binding of Isaac, and the zodiac cycle, for example - it would be erroneous to assume that they


\footnote{158} ibid., 384.
functioned identically or had the same meaning in different contexts.\textsuperscript{159} Thus, rather than search for universal explanations for synagogue art, this chapter will consider the motifs from the Huqoq mosaics in their local and regional context.\textsuperscript{160}

\section*{3.2 SAMSON AND THE MARTYRS: THE HUQOQ MOSAICS IN CONTEXT}

As discussed in Chapter II, the Huqoq mosaics include two scenes from the life of Samson, a dedicatory inscription flanked by two female faces, and a panel featuring a battle scene with animals above an old man and several young men standing in an arcade. Although the panels represent only a portion of the synagogue floor and will be better understood when the entire building has been excavated, the imagery speaks volumes on its own. With the expectation that interpretations may change after more mosaics are uncovered, we will now discuss the imagery of the Huqoq mosaics and its possible significance.

The biblical hero Samson is known for his strength as well as his downfall at the hands of the seductress Delilah. The rabbis held largely negative views about Samson, due to his weakness for non-Israelite women.\textsuperscript{161} Matthew Grey has observed, however, that liturgical texts, many of which were produced by priestly circles rather than rabbinic ones, portray Samson in a positive light.\textsuperscript{162} In the \textit{Hellenistic Synagogal Prayers}, a collection of liturgical prayers preserved in the late fourth century Christian text \textit{Apostolic Constitutions}, Samson is mentioned among a list of biblical heroes who received special gifts from God. Prayer 6 opens

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{159} ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{160} ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{161} Matthew Grey “The Redeemer to Arise from the House of Dan: Samson, Apocalypticism, and Messianic Hopes in Late Antique Galilee,” \textit{Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman Period} 44.4-5 (2013), 557.
\item \textsuperscript{162} ibid., 24-40.
\end{itemize}
with a petition to God to fulfill his promises and bring salvation to his people as he once did through these biblical heroes:

   even as you received the gifts of the righteous in their generations: [...] 
Gideon upon the rock, and the fleeces, before his sin; 
Manoah— and of his wife— in the field; 
Samson, in his thirst before his error; 
Jephthah, in the war, before his unwise promise 163

The *Hellenistic Synagogal Prayers* focus on Samson’s successes, such as his victories over the Philistines and his acts of great strength, rather than his downfall, which was caused by his wandering eye. The prayer lists Samson among a group of heroes through whom God worked to deliver Israel but who fell victim to their human limitations and flaws, like Gideon before he led Israel to idolatry (Judges 8:22-28). 164

Grey proposes that the message of deliverance and redemption found in these prayers and other liturgical texts from the Byzantine period appealed particularly to the Jewish population of Galilee because they expressed the communities’ apocalyptic and messianic hopes. 165 Jewish apocalypticism is well documented during the Second Temple period and the time of the Jewish revolts, evidenced by texts such as the Book of Jubilees and other works found at Qumran, the Book of Daniel, and parts of the New Testament. 166 According to Grey,

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164 Grey, “The Redeemer to Arise,” 578.

165 ibid., 23-4.

the interest in biblical heroes like Samson, evident in liturgical texts and synagogue art, suggests that apocalyptic thought persisted in Galilee into the Byzantine period.  

A third mosaic discovered in 2013 may express a similar hope for God’s deliverance. This panel is divided into three horizontal registers surrounded by a wavy ribbon border. In the top register, which continues into the west baulk of the excavations square, four soldiers armed with swords face a group of animals, including an elephant covered with armor. The middle register features seven men framed in an arcade. The central figure is an enthroned old man with a white beard, and the others are young men who turn and gaze at him. The bottom register depicts the bodies of a soldier and a bull stabbed with spears.  

Matthew Grey and Chad Spiegel have identified this panel as a conflation of scenes from the books of Maccabees depicting events associated with Jewish martyrs. The top register may portray a battle scene from 1-2 Maccabees, while the middle register may represent Eleazar the priest and seven young men who were martyred after refusing to eat pork, as recorded in 2 Maccabees 6-7:

Eleazar, one of the scribes in high position, a man now advanced in age and of noble presence, was being force to open his mouth to eat swine’s

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169 ibid., 32.
170 ibid.
171 ibid.
172 ibid., 33
173 I am grateful to the authors for providing me a copy of their unpublished paper “Noble Death and Divine Deliverance: The Huqoq Mosaic and the Veneration of the Maccabees in Late Antiquity.”
174 ibid., 4-5
flesh. But he, welcoming death with honor rather than life with pollution, went up to the rack of his own accord, spitting out the flesh.  

It happened also that seven brothers and their mother were arrested and were being compelled by the king, under torture with whips and thongs, to partake of unlawful swine’s flesh […] the young man said, ‘…I, like my brothers, give up body and life for the laws of our ancestors, appealing to God to show mercy soon to our nation […] and through me and my brothers to bring to an end the wrath of the Almighty that has justly fallen on our whole nation.  

The glorification of Jewish martyrs who resisted the non-Jewish rulers of Palestine in this mosaic complements the depictions of Samson, another hero who resisted non-Jewish rule.  

The mosaics at Wadi Hamam - Samson smiting the Philistines, the crossing of the Red Sea, and the construction of the Temple - may convey a similar message of deliverance and salvation.  

Grey argues that this imagery is evidence of a tradition of messianic and apocalyptic beliefs in Lower Eastern Galilee, particularly in the vicinity of Tiberias and Mt. Arbel. After the end of the Bar Kokhba revolt, a series of events occurred which may have perpetuated this apocalyptic mindset, such as the rise of Christianity in the fourth century, the Byzantine-Persian wars in the sixth and seventh centuries, and the Muslim conquest of Palestine in the seventh century. A number of Jewish texts preserve traditions that associate the coming of the messiah and other apocalyptic events with the region of Lower Eastern Galilee. For example, the seventh century Sefer Zerubbabel recounts a vision by Zerubabbel in which the events preceding the end of days center around Tiberias and, before a final battle, the messiah descends from heaven to the top of

175 I Maccabees 6:18-19 (NRSV)  
176 I Maccabees 7:1-38 (NRSV)  
178 For the Wadi Hamam mosaics, see Uzi Leibner and Shulamit Miller, “A Figural Mosaic in the Synagogue at Khirbet Wadi Hamam,” JRA 23 (2010), 239-40.  
Mt. Arbel. While none of these traditions specifically refer to Samson as an apocalyptic figure, his exploits against the Philistines would have dovetailed well with the other apocalyptic and messianic beliefs prevalent in late antique Galilee.

3.3 THE FUNCTION OF MOSAICS IN ANCIENT SYNAGOGUES

While it is possible to identify the images in synagogue art and speculate about the themes and ideas that they conveyed, it is fare more difficult to determine how this art functioned within synagogues. Symbols are a complex psychological phenomenon, requiring the viewer to bridge the gap between an image that is seen and its implied meaning/s. An individual’s cultural context, beliefs, and experiences influence his/her interpretation of a symbol, allowing for infinite different readings of the same image. Additionally, the meanings of symbols change over time and among different cultures.

A point from which to begin is that synagogue art differentiated synagogues from other buildings. Most Jews in late Roman and Byzantine Galilee lived in plain stone houses that contrasted markedly with the stone carvings, colorful mosaics, and decorative instruments found in synagogues. It is possible that synagogue art was some of the only figured art that most Jews saw regularly, increasing its impact. But why was this “otherness” necessary? Why did


182 ibid.

183 ibid.
Jewish communities pay for expensive synagogue decorations like stone carvings and mosaic floors?

Inscriptions provide a glimpse into a community’s views about its synagogue and offer a clue to understanding the special status of synagogue buildings. Inscriptions on the mosaic floors at Hammath Tiberias (Stratum IIA), Na’aran, and Beth She’an all refer to the synagogue building as a “holy place” (קדש). If a synagogue was a holy place, what was the source of its holiness? A passage in the Mishnah containing instructions for the purchase and sale of synagogue buildings indicates that it was the Torah scrolls:

The people of a town who sold their town square:
They must buy a synagogue with its proceeds;
If they sell a synagogue, they must acquire a [scroll] chest.
If they sell a [scroll] chest, they must acquire cloths [to wrap the Torah scrolls].
If they sell cloths, they must acquire books (i.e. the Prophets and the Writings)
If they sell books, they must acquire a Torah.

Thus, money acquired from selling a synagogue building could only be used to purchase something with a greater degree of relation to the Torah scrolls, indicating that the “holiness” of synagogues emanated from scrolls, not the building itself.

The concepts of “holiness” and “otherness” are conflated in the Hebrew linguistic tradition. The root of the Hebrew word for “holy” or “sacred”, קדוש, also means “cut off” or “set apart.” The term is used when God makes his covenant with Israel at Sinai, thereby

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185 M Megillah 3:1


187 BDB 871-4.
setting Israel apart from other nations (Deut. 14:2). The Jerusalem Temple embodied this notion of sanctity with its concentric levels of purity. The temenos wall, which divided the Inner Court from the space open to Gentiles, took its name from the Greek verb ἀφύσιν, to cut. Joan Branham has proposed that synagogue chancel screens mimicked the temenos wall in the Temple, creating sacred space by distinguishing between the profane space of the synagogue hall and the sacred space of the apse, where the Torah scrolls were kept: “Like a threshold that signifies separation and continuity then, the soreg or the mehitza in front of the Torah scrolls creates the ‘edge’ necessary for the existence and definition of two distinct yet interrelated spatial realities.”

Other scholars have proposed that synagogue art played a role in spiritual activity. In *Jewish Symbols*, E. R. Goodenough proposed a mystical reading of synagogue art, arguing that the symbols and scenes portrayed on synagogue floors aided in the congregants’ spiritual journey to experience the divine. Goodenough believed that the nave panels of the Bet Alpha mosaic, for example, illustrated the spiritual ascent from earth to heaven that congregants experienced through prayer and Torah reading during the service. When they entered the synagogue, congregants first saw a panel depicting the Binding of Isaac, which according to Goodenough represented God’s intervention in earthly affairs, symbolized by the divine hand extending into the scene, crossing the frame of the panel, thereby connecting heaven and earth.

189 ibid.
190 ibid., 333
Moving forward, they saw the zodiac wheel representing the cosmos, and, finally, the Temple itself.\textsuperscript{191}

Jodi Magness has recently argued that the Helios and zodiac motif, found in seven synagogues in Palestine, is related to the Hekhalot mystical tradition and that Helios should be identified with the biblical character Enoch.\textsuperscript{192} According to certain mystical traditions from the Second Temple period and later, Enoch was transported to heaven, where he was transformed into the divine super-angel Metatron and learned the secrets of time.\textsuperscript{193} Hekhalot literature provides accounts of rabbis who undertake inner spiritual journeys through the seven levels of heaven and are taught these secrets by Metatron.\textsuperscript{194} Once such account comes from Rabbi Ishmael in 3 Enoch:

> When I ascended on high to behold the vision of the Merkaba and had entered the six halls, one within the other, as soon as I reached the door of the seventh hall I stood still in prayer before the Holy One […] Forthwith the Holy One, blessed be He, send me to Metatron his servant the angel, the Prince of the Presence, and he, spreading his wings, with great joy came to meet me.\textsuperscript{195}

Later in the book, Metatron teaches Rabbi Ishmael secrets about the inner workings of the cosmos, time, and past and future events. Hekhalot texts refer to Metatron as Sar ha Panim

\textsuperscript{191} E. R. Goodenough, \textit{Jewish Symbols} v.1, 246-53. For the Bet Alpha mosaics, see Sukenik, \textit{The Ancient Synagogue of Beth Alpha}.

\textsuperscript{192} Magness, “Heaven on Earth,” 8. The synagogues that contain zodiac wheels are Hammath Tiberias, Bet Alpha, Na’aran, Khirbet Susiya, Husifa, and Sephoris. At Sephoris, Helios is represented by a sun. A panel from the ‘Ein Gedi synagogue lists the signs of the zodiac and the twelve Hebrew months. The Wadi Hamam synagogue may have contained a zodiac, but too little of the nave mosaic is preserved to be certain. See Leibner and Miller, “A Figural Mosaic,” 239-40.

\textsuperscript{193} See, for example, 1 Enoch 12, 41 and 2 Enoch 1-2, 22. 1 Enoch is dated to the second century BCE through the first century CE and 2 Enoch is dated to the first century CE. Discussion and translation in \textit{The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha} v.1, James H. Charlesworth, ed. (Garden City: Doubleday, 1983)

\textsuperscript{194} See, for example, \textit{Hekhalot Rabbati} 82. Translation from James Davila, \textit{Hekhalot Literature in Translation: Major Texts of Merkavah Mysticism} (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 51-158.

\textsuperscript{195} 3 Enoch 1:1-2, 4. For translation see above, note 193.
(Prince of the Presence) and a lesser Yahweh, highlighting his role as divine messenger, facilitating contact between heaven and earth. According to the Hekhalot tradition, the journey to heaven is dangerous, requiring the mystic to provide passwords and pass tests to pass through the levels of heaven.\footnote{Hekhalot Rabbati 94 begins with the lyrics to a song that the adept must recite before the Merkava throne, illustrating the esoteric quality of these passwords and codes that made them only accessible to learned mystics: ‘Sing, sing for joy, supernal dwelling! Shout, shout for joy, precious vessel! Surely thou shalt gladden the King who sitteth upon thee, With a joy as the joy of the bridegroom in his bridechamber,’ Thus said I when I came to take refuge under the shadow of Thy wings. For translation see above, note 194.} Only those with extensive training could attempt this dangerous ascent. Thus, for much of the Jewish population, spiritual experiences were reserved to prayer and liturgy in the synagogue. Thus, Magness proposes that synagogue congregants viewed Metatron as a divine intermediary who facilitated the connection between humans and God, indicated by the fact that he is stationed at the center of the zodiac wheel.\footnote{Magness, “Heaven on Earth,” 31-4 proposes that the zodiac wheel mimicked the domes of monumental churches, which often had an image of Christ Pantokrator in the center to illustrate Jesus’ role as divine intermediary.}

Other scholars posit a relationship between synagogue art and liturgical texts, noting that they often make use of the same themes and biblical stories.\footnote{For example, Seth Schwartz, “On the Program and Reception,” Steven Fine, “Art and the Liturgical Context of the Sepphoris Synagogue Mosaic,” in Sacred Realm: The Emergence of the Synagogue in the Ancient World (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Fine, “Liturgy and the Art of the Dura Europos Synagogue,” in Liturgy in the Life of the Synagogue, Ruth Langer and Steven Fine, eds. (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2005).} Some piyyutim reference motifs commonly found in synagogue art, including the shofar, the Temple, the Binding of Isaac, and various astrological themes. For example, a fifth-sixth century piyyut composed for the Ninth of Av reads:

So by our sins was the Temple destroyed, and by our iniquities was the Sanctuary burnt; in the land joined together they wove elegies, and the

heavenly host lifted its voice in dirges// […] The tribes of Jacob wept bitterly, and even the signs of the zodiac shed tears.199

According to Schwartz, congregations chose images that were central to their liturgy to decorate synagogue floors, and these images in turn complemented, interacted, and reinforced the liturgy.200 Citing similar work by scholars of Christian art, Steven Fine proposes that synagogue was designed to complement liturgy as it changed throughout the year: “I imagine that the imagery of the Binding of Isaac had different meaning on Rosh Hashanah than it did at other times, just as the Temple imagery would have been seen differently on Passover than on Tishah be-Av.”201

The redating of Galilean type synagogues offers fresh evidence about the role of figured mosaics in synagogue activity. The theories discussed above present a variety of interpretations of figured art, its role in delineating sacred space, liturgy, and expressing the views and beliefs of a congregation, but all of these theories are predicated on the belief that mosaics played an important role of some kind. If this is the case, what can be said about Galilean type synagogues that did not contain mosaics?

The development of Jewish art originally was viewed in relation to the traditional synagogue chronology, according to which synagogues were built in distinct styles in three

199 English translation from Seth Schwartz, “On the Program and Reception,” 180. The Hebrew text can be found in Ernst Goldschmidt, Order of Elegies for the Ninth of Be-Av (Jerusalem 1977), 29-30. [Hebrew]


201 Steven Fine, “Art and the Liturgical Context,” 234. Fine cites the theories of Staale Sinding-Larsen, who has proposed that church art conveyed different meanings throughout the liturgical year. See Sinding-Larsen, Iconography and Ritual: A Study of Analytical Perspectives (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1984), 34. Lee Levine has objected to the liturgical reading of synagogue art. First, liturgical texts and synagogue art contain similar themes because they drew from the same collection of biblical stories and themes, not necessarily because they were related. Second, it is not clear whether all congregations were familiar with piyyutim. Finally, early churches used art to explain liturgical concepts because Christian doctrine involved abstract concepts (the symbolism of the Eucharist, the Holy Spirit, the resurrection), whereas Jewish liturgy was more straightforward and was already elucidated by the targumim and sermons. Levine also argues that this position assumes a one-way direction of influence from liturgy to art, which may not have been the case. See Levine, Visual Judaism, 379-81.
consecutive periods. The first of these styles, the Galilean type, was built in the second and third centuries and was characterized by a carved stone façade and a relatively plain interior. Scholars of Jewish art have interpreted the exterior decoration of Galilean type synagogues as a technique that further delineated between the profane outside world and the “sacred” or otherwise special interior of the synagogue. The decoration on Galilean type synagogues was concentrated on the southern wall where congregants entered and such ornamentation was most likely to be seen. Some synagogues were decorated with explicitly Jewish symbols, such as the wheeled Torah shrine at Capernaum, but the majority of these decorations simply copied the style of pagan temples. Some synagogues were even mistaken for temples, a problem addressed in the Talmud:

Now, how is an unwitting and unintentional transgression of idolatry possible? Shall we say that one thought it [a pagan temple] to be a synagogue and bowed down to it—then his heart was to Heaven! But if he saw a royal statue and bowed down to it—what are the circumstances? If he accepted it as a god, he is a willful sinner; while if he did not accept it as a god, he has not committed idolatry at all!  

As in temples, the carved decoration of Galilean type synagogues functioned to distinguish the building, marking it as special and other. Those synagogues with Jewish symbols carved on their facades were marked as distinctly Jewish, while those without them simply appeared to be special spaces.

According to the traditional synagogue chronology, mosaic floors appeared in the fourth century in broadhouse synagogues, and reached their apogee in the Byzantine synagogues of the fifth and sixth centuries. At the same time, synagogue liturgy had developed,

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203 See Chapter I for a full description of Galilean synagogues.
204 b Shabbat 72b; discussed in Schwartz, “On the Program and Reception,” 172.
the Bavli and Yerushalemi were in progress or nearing completion, Jewish mysticism was blossoming, and Christians had begun to build monumental churches, staking their claim over Palestine and the legacy of the Temple. Synagogue mosaics emerged in response to these and other conditions in late antiquity.

The revision of the traditional synagogue chronology discussed in Chapter I affects this model of the evolution of synagogue mosaics. It is now clear that synagogues were built in all three styles concurrently, including those with and without mosaic floors. For example, the Capernaum synagogue stood at the same time as the Hammath Tiberias and Huqoq synagogues, both of which have mosaic floors. Similarly, the Nabratein synagogue, a Galilean type synagogue without a mosaic floor, was built no earlier than the mid fourth century and was used at least through the eighth century.

If mosaics were a key aspect of synagogue activity, what does this mean about synagogues without them? The theories discussed above present a variety of interpretations of synagogue art, but all agree that figural mosaics were an important part of the activities that took place in synagogues. Mosaics may have helped congregants visualize theological concepts, expressed beliefs that were important to a community, aided in mystical or spiritual practices, and delineated sacred space within a synagogue. If mosaics suggest the presence of certain

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205 Magness has dated phase IIA of the Hammath Tiberias synagogue (the phase when the synagogue had a mosaic floor that included a zodiac wheel, Temple/Torah shrine, and a series of inscriptions flanked by lions) to the first quarter of the fifth century, and the Capernaum synagogue to the fifth century. For Hammath Tiberias, see Magness, “Heaven on Earth,” 8-13; and Dothan, Hammath Tiberias I, 27-68. For Capernaum, see Magness, “The Question of the Synagogue: the Problem of Typology,” in Judaism in Late Antiquity vol. 5, (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 18-33; and discussion in Chapter I.

206 Eric Meyers and Carol Meyers, the excavators, propose that the synagogue was constructed in three phases, the first of which was built in the mid third century. Jodi Magness has revised their dating and proposed that the synagogue was built in the mid fourth century and used through at least the eighth century. Eric M. Meyers and Carol L. Meyers, Excavations at Ancient Nabratein: Synagogue and Environs (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2009), 26-32. Jodi Magness, “Review Article: The Ancient Synagogue at Nabratein,” BASOR 358 (2010), 61-8.
practices and beliefs, what does their absence indicate? Did congregations whose synagogues had no mosaics have different beliefs or practices than those that did?

While it is difficult to reconstruct an individual community’s beliefs and practices, even with clues from synagogue art, some preliminary conclusions can be drawn from the absence of mosaics in some synagogues. First, this absence indicates that mosaic floors, their iconography, and their potential role in synagogue activity were not a priority for all Jewish communities. While some congregations may have refrained from installing such a floor for financial reasons, the evidence suggests that many communities simply decided not to have mosaics. Mosaics were expensive, but they appear in synagogues in all sizes and locations, from cities such as Tiberias and Sepphoris to small villages like Wadi Hamam, Horvat Kor, and Huqoq. An inscription from the Beth Alpha mosaic states that the congregation paid for the floor in kind rather than with cash, evidence that even communities without impressive financial means could still acquire one if they were so inclined. At Meroth, the mosaic floor was installed half a century after the building’s initial construction, at which point the congregation would have recouped the money spent on the building’s initial construction. If mosaic floors were viewed universally as important to synagogue activity, we might expect more cases like this. Nevertheless, many Galilean type synagogues were never renovated to include a mosaic floor.

If cost was not a prohibitive factor, it must be that some communities simply did not desire to include mosaic floors in their synagogues, which should temper universal theories about the importance of mosaics. That the Jewish population of Capernaum and Chorazin, for

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example, chose not to include a mosaic in their synagogues despite being surrounded by other synagogues that did indicates that mosaics were not universally necessary for synagogue activity. As a result, we should consider the possibility that these communities had different beliefs or followed different liturgical traditions than communities that did include mosaics in their synagogues, as well as investigate whether a difference in population, location, settlement size, or socio-economic status might affect a community’s preferences about such decoration. The discovery that synagogues with and without mosaics were contemporary thus proves that a lack of art may be as important as the presence of it.
ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure Ia – Triple doorway on the south wall of the Galilean type synagogue at Kfar Bar’am. Photo by author.
Figure Ib (above) – Decorative lintel with carved wreath above the center door on the south wall of the Kfar Bar'am synagogue. Photo by author.

Figure II (below) – Putti from the Chorazin synagogue (Galilean type). Photo by author.
Figure III – Map of Eastern Galilee with the four synagogues discussed in Ch. II. Created by author.
Figure IV – Mosaic with female faces flanking inscription discovered in 2012. Photo by Jim Haberman. Used with permission from Jodi Magness.
Figure V – Mosaic of Samson and the foxes discovered in 2012. Photo by Jim Haberman. Used with permission from Jodi Magness.
Figure VI – Mosaic of Samson with the gates of Gaza discovered in 2013. Photo by Jim Haberman. Used with permission from Jodi Magness.
Figure VII – Mosaic possibly depicting scenes from the books of Maccabees. Photo by Jim Haberman. Used with permission from Jodi Magness.
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