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**Title** Finding Samson in Byzantine Galilee: The 2011-2012 Archaeological Excavations at Huqoq

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**Abstract** This article surveys the past and current research on Huqoq, an ancient Jewish village near the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee. Historical sources and modern explorations show that Huqoq was a small agricultural village during the biblical and postbiblical periods. Formal excavations of the site began in 2011 and have uncovered portions of the ancient village and its synagogue. This article highlights the discoveries made during the first two seasons of excavation (2011-2012), including pieces of a mosaic floor in the synagogue's east aisle that depict two female faces, an inscription, and an illustration of Samson tying lit torches to foxes (Judges 15:1-5). Because of the rarity of Samson in Jewish art, the religious significance of this mosaic is difficult to explain. However, liturgical texts from late antiquity indicate that some synagogue congregations celebrated Samson as an apocalyptic image and messianic prototype, whose victories against the Philistines fostered hope in the eschatological messiah expected to appear and deliver the Jewish community from foreign oppression.

# FINDING SAMSON IN BYZANTINE GALILEE: THE 2011-2012 ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATIONS AT HUQOQ

Matthew J. Grey with Jodi Magness

The study of ancient history and culture in Lower Galilee, the area west of the Sea of Galilee and the Jordan River, has been greatly enriched in recent decades by an increasing amount of archaeological research. From the 1970s to the early 2000s, archaeologists have investigated the remains of Galilee's two major cities (Sepphoris and Tiberias) and many well-known villages (such as Capernaum, Cana, and Magdala),<sup>1</sup> producing unprecedented insight into sociopolitical dynamics, daily life, and religious institutions during the time of Jesus and the early rabbis (i.e., the Roman-Byzantine period). These excavations have also prompted scholarly discussion on a number of important issues, including the chronology of monumental synagogue buildings,<sup>2</sup> the development

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1. For discussions of these and related excavations, see Douglas R. Edwards and C. Thomas McCollough, eds., *Archaeology and the Galilee: Texts and Contexts in the Greco-Roman and Byzantine Periods* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997); Eric M. Meyers, ed., *Galilee through the Centuries: Confluence of Cultures* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1999); Jonathan L. Reed, *Archaeology and the Galilean Jesus: A Re-examination of the Evidence* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000); Mordechai Aviam, ed., *Jews, Pagans, and Christians in the Galilee: 25 Years of Archaeological Excavations and Surveys: Hellenistic to Byzantine Periods* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2004).

2. See the debate between Jodi Magness, Eric Meyers, and James Strange in *Judaism in Late Antiquity*, vol. 4, pt. 3, ed. Alan J. Avery-Peck and Jacob Neusner (Leiden:

of Jewish religious art,<sup>3</sup> the dating of local pottery types,<sup>4</sup> and the extent of rabbinic influence within the Jewish community.<sup>5</sup> In short, research on ancient Galilee is experiencing an exciting era of discovery that is significantly refining our understanding of early Judaism and Christianity.

As a part of this research, scholars have begun to study some of Galilee's lesser-known sites in an effort to provide a more rounded view of the region and bring new evidence to bear on the ongoing debates.<sup>6</sup> One such site is Huqoq, a small Jewish village located near the northwest shore of the lake, about 12.5 km north of Tiberias. Ancient literature indicates that Huqoq was occupied during the biblical and postbiblical periods, and scattered remains at the site indicate that portions of its ancient dwellings and synagogue lie beneath the surface. The site is also currently uninhabited, making it an ideal location for new archaeological excavations.

These considerations led to the organization of the Huqoq Excavation Project (HEP)—a consortium of universities directed by Jodi Magness of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill—which began excavating the site in 2011.<sup>7</sup> Although this project is

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Brill, 2001), 1-63, 71-91; cf. David Milson, *Art and Architecture of the Synagogue in Late Antique Palestine: In the Shadow of the Church* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 1-83.

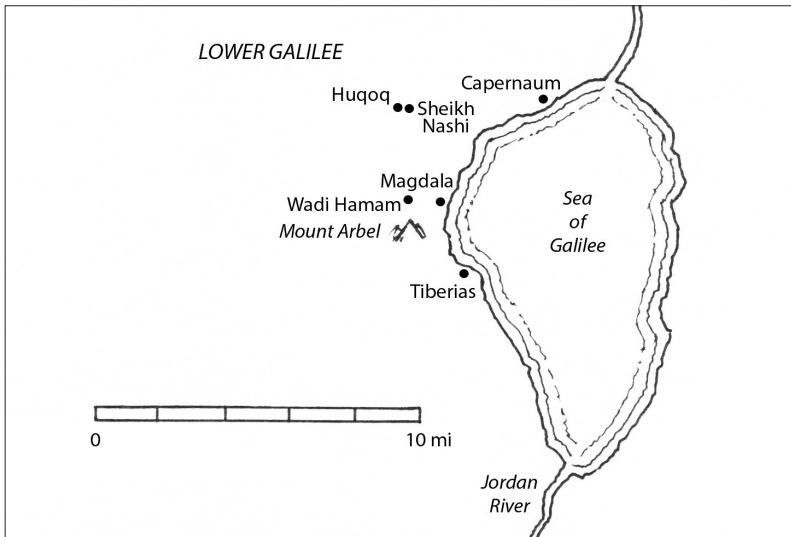
3. See Steven Fine, *Art and Judaism in the Greco-Roman World: Toward a New Jewish Archaeology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); and Lee I. Levine, *Visual Judaism in Late Antiquity: Historical Contexts of Jewish Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

4. For example, see the studies and different positions reflected in David Adan-Bayewitz, *Common Pottery in Roman Galilee: A Study of Local Trade* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1993), and Jodi Magness, "The Pottery from the Village of Capernaum and the Chronology of Galilean Synagogues," *Tel Aviv* 39/2 (2012): 110-22.

5. See Martin Goodman, *State and Society in Roman Galilee A.D. 132-212*, 2nd ed. (London: Mitchell, 2000), and Lee I. Levine, *The Rabbinic Class of Roman Palestine in Late Antiquity* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1989).

6. For example, Uzi Leibner's survey of the settlements throughout eastern Lower Galilee includes valuable discussion of the villages, trade networks, and demographics of the region; Uzi Leibner, *Settlement and History in Hellenistic, Roman, and Byzantine Galilee: An Archaeological Survey of the Eastern Galilee* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009).

7. Jodi Magness is joined as codirector of the HEP by Shua Kisilevitz of the Israel Antiquities Authority. Senior staff members include Chad Spigel (area supervisor over the ancient village), Matthew Grey (area supervisor over the ancient synagogue), Brian



*Map of Lower Galilee (region west of the lake) where Huqoq is located.*

only in its third year, it has already made valuable contributions to our understanding of Jewish village life, art, and religious worship in ancient Galilee. This article will highlight some of these contributions by summarizing past and current research related to Huqoq and considering some of the ways in which this research adds to ongoing historical discussions. It will first survey the literary sources that sketch the village's history, the explorations of the site prior to formal excavations, and the first two seasons of excavations conducted by the HEP (2011-2012). It will then describe the most exciting discovery at the site to date—a rare mosaic depicting a story of Samson from the biblical book of Judges—and summarize some of the current research on the mosaic's historical significance, thus showing how the Huqoq excavations are enhancing our understanding of Galilee's ancient history, culture, and socioreligious dynamics.

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Coussens (assistant area supervisor over the modern village), and research specialists in ancient pottery, glass, botanical remains, animal bones, and mosaics. Universities that participated in the HEP consortium in 2011 were the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Wofford College, and the University of Toronto. They were joined in 2012 by Brigham Young University, Trinity University (TX), and the University of Oklahoma (without Wofford College).

## Huqoq in Literary Sources—A Brief Sketch of the Village’s History

Long before archaeological excavations began at Huqoq, scholars were aware of ancient literary references to the site that provide information about its history and its relationship to the surrounding region. These references indicate that Huqoq was a small agricultural village just northwest of the Sea of Galilee that was occupied in the biblical, postbiblical, medieval, and modern periods. The earliest mention of the site is in Joshua 19:34, which lists “Hukkok” (חוקק) as a village apportioned to the tribe of Naphtali after the Israelite conquest of Canaan.<sup>8</sup> This passage identifies the village as marking a boundary of Naphtali’s tribal lands.<sup>9</sup> Although it provides no further information about the village’s size, population, or activities, it suggests that Huqoq was occupied in the late Iron Age (ca. 1000–586 BCE, when material for the Deuteronomistic history was taking shape), if not already in the Late Bronze Age (ca. 1550–1200 BCE, when Joshua is said to have allotted the tribal lands). An additional reference to “Hukok (חוקק) with its pasture lands” exists in 1 Chronicles 6:75, but this text locates the village much farther west in the tribal lands of Asher and likely represents an orthographic mistake made by the Chronicler.<sup>10</sup>

8. The Septuagint gives the name as *Iakava* (LXX Joshua 19:34), either providing a highly unusual transliteration of חוקק or listing a different village entirely. The identification of the biblical “Hukkok” with the Arab village of ‘Yaquq is well documented in Nurit Lissovsky and Nadav Na’aman, “A New Look on the Boundary System of the Twelve Tribes,” *Ugarit-Forschungen* 35 (2003): 291–332 (esp. 293–97).

9. Joshua’s claim that Huqoq marked the western boundary of Naphtali has caused confusion among some scholars since Huqoq is located farther east than would be expected for this border. However, Lissovsky and Na’aman view this as evidence that the boundaries between ancient Israelite tribes likely contained large gaps that are not obvious in the biblical text; see Lissovsky and Na’aman, “New Look,” 293–97.

10. The list of Asher’s Levitical cities in 1 Chronicles 6 includes Huqoq (חוקק [MT 6:60]; *Akak* [LXX 6:75]), but this may reflect an orthographic mistake made by the Chronicler since the same list in Joshua 21:31 has “Helkath (חלקת/Χελκათ) and with its pasture lands” instead of Huqoq. See H. G. M. Williamson, *1 and 2 Chronicles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 76; Sara Japhet, *I and II Chronicles* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 145; Lissovsky and Na’aman, “New Look,” 294. All biblical quotations in this article are from the New Revised Standard Version.

Unfortunately, there are no references to Huqoq in late Second Temple period sources,<sup>11</sup> but archaeological surveys indicate that the village was occupied by Jews and engaged in agricultural activities during the Late Hellenistic and Early Roman periods (see below), making it contemporary with Jesus and his earliest followers. Although Huqoq is not named in the New Testament, its close proximity to the lake places Huqoq within walking distance of some of the most prominent locations in the Gospels (including Capernaum and Magdala),<sup>12</sup> thus raising the possibility that Jesus had some interaction with the village during his Galilean ministry. Furthermore, some scholars have suggested that Huqoq was located along a prominent road system in the first century and may therefore have been easily accessible to trade and travel at that time.<sup>13</sup> These considerations strengthen the possibility that Jesus visited Huqoq as he “went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom” (Matthew 4:23).

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11. According to some secondary scholarship, the site was called *Hucuca* (a transliteration of its Hebrew name in Joshua 19:34) during the Early Roman period, but the ancient support for this claim is not clear; see, for example, Walid Khalidi, ed., *All That Remains: The Palestinian Villages Occupied and Depopulated by Israel in 1948* (Washington, DC: Institute for Palestinian Studies, 1992), 546. Emmanuel Damati, “Kefar Ekho-Huqoq: The Unknown Fortress of Josephus Flavius,” *Cathedra* 39 (1986): 37-43 [Hebrew], suggested that Huqoq was Josephus’s “missing” fortress of Caphareccho (Καφαρεκχω) from the late first century CE (Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.573; cf. *Life* 37), but this identification has been rejected by most scholars; see Leibner, *Settlement and History*, 153.

12. Within view of the Sea of Galilee, Huqoq is located 3.2 miles to the west of Capernaum (the hometown of Peter and base for Jesus’s Galilean ministry) and 2.8 miles to the north of Magdala (the hometown of Mary Magdalene).

13. Nurit Lissovsky, “Hukkok, Yaqoq and Habakkuk’s Tomb: Changes over Time and Space,” *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 140/2 (2008): 103-18 (esp. 106-7), suggests that ancient pavement and stone steps associated with the nearby “Tomb of Habakkuk” might date from the Roman period but acknowledges that such a road does not appear in Yoram Tsafrir, Leah Di Segni, and Judith Green, *Tabula Imperii Romani Iudaea-Palestina: Eretz Israel in the Hellenistic, Roman and Byzantine Periods; Map and Gazetteer* (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1994), map 4. For an attempt to trace the routes Jesus traveled along the Sea of Galilee, see Bargil Pixner, *Paths of the Messiah and Sites of the Early Church from Galilee to Jerusalem* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2010), 53-76.

The Jewish demographics of Huqoq during the Roman period are attested in rabbinic literature, in particular the Palestinian Talmud, which mentions “Hiqoq” (חִיקוֹק) in several accounts from the late second to mid-fourth century.<sup>14</sup> These references provide the name of one rabbinic sage from the village (“R. Hizkiyah of Huqoq”)<sup>15</sup> and mention the agricultural activities of other villagers, such as “Yohanan from Hiqoq,” who brought a saddle bag full of bread pieces to R. Hiyya in nearby Tiberias.<sup>16</sup> Another passage describes a visit of R. Simeon b. Lakish to the village during which he saw locals gathering seeds from wild mustard plants.<sup>17</sup> These stories and the individuals associated with them point to an active Jewish presence at Huqoq in late antiquity and show that Jews at that time identified the village with the biblical site of “Hukkok,” a claim similarly made in contemporary Christian literature that transliterates its name as ΕΙΧΩΧ (Eusebius) and *Icoc* (Jerome).<sup>18</sup>

The next references to Huqoq are found in Jewish pilgrimage accounts from the Middle Ages. By then, the Jewish inhabitants of the village had apparently abandoned the site. It was subsequently resettled by a small Muslim population that called the village ‘Yaquq, an Arabic variation of the earlier Hebrew name. It is not yet clear exactly when the village was abandoned by its Jewish inhabitants, resettled by Muslims, or renamed, but these developments are assumed in the reports of Jewish pilgrims traveling by the site to visit the nearby “Tomb of Habakkuk” in the thirteenth through seventeenth centuries. These accounts use both the Hebrew and Arabic names of the village, describe its proximity to the tomb and a natural spring, and

14. Lissovsky and Na‘aman, “New Look,” 294–95; Leibner, *Settlement and History*, 153–54.

15. *y. Sanhedrin* 3:10, 21d.

16. *y. Pesahim* 1:4, 27c.

17. *y. Shevi‘it* 9:1, 38c. This story shows that mustard seed was classified by the rabbis as a wild plant (and not a cultivated vegetable) for halakhic purposes; see Leibner, *Settlement and History*, 153–54.

18. Lissovsky and Na‘aman, “New Look,” 295; Lissovsky, “Hukkok,” 105; Leibner, *Settlement and History*, 153.

mention its Muslim demographics.<sup>19</sup> Government administrative and taxation documents from the Ottoman and British Mandate periods indicate that ‘Yaqûq continued as a small Muslim agricultural village until Israel’s War of Independence in 1948, when it was once more abandoned, never to be reinhabited.<sup>20</sup>

This literary survey provides a rough sketch of the occupational history of Huqoq, attesting to an agricultural community in the village during the biblical (possibly Late Bronze and/or Iron Age), postbiblical (Roman-Byzantine), medieval, and pre-1948 modern periods. Such a skeletal history suggests that Huqoq was inhabited during all major periods of the Jewish and Muslim presence in Galilee, but it tells us little about its specific architectural features, economic status, socioreligious dynamics, or the daily life of its inhabitants. Fortunately, modern archaeological research has been able to fill in many of these gaps and flesh out our understanding of the site’s religious and historical developments.

### **Archaeological Research at Huqoq— Exploration and Surveys**

Archaeological research at Huqoq has been conducted in various ways since the European exploration of Palestine in the late nineteenth century. This research—beginning with general surveys of the site and now continuing with formal excavations—confirms the historical insights gleaned from literary sources and greatly expands our understanding of the village’s socioreligious setting. The earliest recorded explorations of Huqoq by Western scholars

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19. Itzhak Ben-Zvi, “The Jewish Settlement at Hukkok-Yaqûq,” *Bulletin of the Jewish Palestine Exploration Society* 6 (1939): 30–33 [Hebrew]; Lissovsky, “Hukkok,” 103–18.

20. Documents show that in the late sixteenth century ‘Yaqûq had a population of close to 400 and paid taxes on wheat, barley, olives, goats, beehives, and a grape or olive press. According to surveys and government records from 1875 to 1945, its population fluctuated between 150 to 200 villagers, possessed between twenty and thirty stone dwellings, and farmed lands allotted for cereals and orchards. A kibbutz was established 2 km to the southeast in 1943. In May 1948, Israeli Palmach forces marched from Tiberias to Safed, resulting in the abandonment or evacuation of many villages along the way (including ‘Yaqûq); see Khalidi, *All That Remains*, 546–57.



included a visit in 1875 by Victor Guérin (a professor at the French School of Athens) and a survey of the region conducted by C. R. Conder and H. H. Kitchener on behalf of the Palestine Exploration Fund in the 1870s and 1880s. These explorers noted the dwellings and small Muslim population of the village, considered connections between its name and the biblical “Hukkok,” and observed traces of the ancient village still visible on the surface, including ashlar and columns scattered around the site and cist tombs and caves at its periphery.<sup>21</sup>

Following the evacuation of ‘Yaquq in 1948, its modern dwellings stood abandoned for nearly two decades, during which time a more formal survey of the ancient remains was conducted by Bezalel Ravani, the Israeli Inspector of Antiquities for the Tiberias region in 1956–57. Around the main settlement, Ravani collected pottery sherds from the surface that attest to activity at the site from the Early Bronze, Iron, Persian, Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine, and Medieval periods. Unfortunately, Ravani did not provide details of the sherds collected in his survey, leaving the relative quantities unknown.<sup>22</sup> He did, however, conduct limited excavations in tombs and burial caves to the north of the site that were discovered (and partially damaged) during the construction of a nearby water system. Four burial caves each contained a central pit, a small ledge encircling the pit, and *loculi* niches hewn into the walls. Finds in the caves included three crude ossuaries likely dating to 70–135 CE.<sup>23</sup> Early Roman pottery, glass, and lamps, traces

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21. See Victor Guérin, *Description géographique, historique et archéologique de la Palestine: Galilée* (Paris: L'imprimerie nationale, 1880), 354–59; Claude R. Conder and H. H. Kitchener, *The Survey of Western Palestine: Memoirs of the Topography, Orography, Hydrography, and Archaeology: Volume 1: Galilee* (London: Palestine Exploration Fund, 1881), 364–65, 420.

22. Leibner, *Settlement and History*, 151.

23. These ossuaries were made of limestone, were roughly dressed, showed heavy chisel marks, and had vaulted lids; see Mordechai Aviam and Danny Syon, “Jewish Ossilegium in Galilee,” in *What Athens Has to Do with Jerusalem: Essays on Classical, Jewish, and Early Christian Art and Archaeology in Honor of Gideon Foerster*, ed. Leonard V. Rutgers (Leuven: Peeters, 2002): 168, 177–78; L. Y. Rahmani, *A Catalogue of Jewish Ossuaries in the Collections of the State of Israel* (Jerusalem: Israel Antiquities Authority, 1994), 116 (no. 158/plate 22).

of wood coffins, and a coin minted under Trajan (98–117 CE) indicate that the tombs were in use during the first and early second centuries.<sup>24</sup>

In 1968, the Israeli army bulldozed the pre-1948 dwellings, leaving the center of the site covered with modern rubble mixed with ancient remains. Since that time, numerous Israeli scholars have conducted additional surveys of Huqoq's ancient features: Yigal Tepper and Yuval Shahar explored a hiding complex, a *miqveh*, and agricultural installations (possibly connected with mustard production) that seem to date to the Roman or Byzantine periods;<sup>25</sup> Zvi Ilan reported architectural fragments and a lintel carved with a menorah clustered in the center of the site, suggesting the presence of a monumental synagogue;<sup>26</sup> and, most recently, Uzi Leibner collected over two hundred potsherds from the surface, which he recorded and dated to the Hellenistic, Roman, and Byzantine periods.<sup>27</sup> Leibner also noted the presence of agricultural installations

24. B. Ravani and P. P. Kahane, "Rock-Cut Tombs at Huqoq," *'Atiqot* 3 (1961): 121–47.

25. Yigal Tepper and Yuval Shahar, "Subterranean Hiding Complexes in the Galilee," in *The Hiding Complexes in the Judean Shephelah*, ed. Amos Kloner and Yigal Tepper (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1987), 279–326 (esp. 311–13) [Hebrew]; Y. Tepper, G. Dar'in, and Y. Tepper, *The Naḥal 'Amud District: Chapters on the Settlement Process* (Tel Aviv: 2000), 25, 84–85 [Hebrew]; Leibner, *Settlement and History*, 151.

26. Zvi Ilan, *Ancient Synagogues in Israel* (Tel Aviv: Ministry of Defence, 1991), 122 [Hebrew]; Leibner, *Settlement and History*, 152. Unfortunately, the lintel fragment carved with a menorah has disappeared from the site, and its location is presently unknown.

27. Leibner, *Settlement and History*, 154–55, reported the dates and relative percentages of his pottery sample as follows: Hellenistic (only two jars), Early Roman (19%), Late Roman (43%), and Byzantine (roughly 25%). Based on this survey, Leibner concluded that the Jewish settlement at Huqoq began sometime in the Late Hellenistic period, continued to grow in the Early Roman period, flourished to its greatest extent in the Late Roman period, and gradually declined throughout the Byzantine period. Leibner claimed that these findings support his position that Lower Galilee experienced a general decline in population by the fifth century CE, a position challenged by others; see Jodi Magness, "Did Galilee Decline in the Fifth Century? The Synagogue at Chorazin Reconsidered," in *Religion, Ethnicity, and Identity in Ancient Galilee*, ed. Jürgen Zangenberg, Harold W. Attridge, and Dale B. Martin (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 259–74; and "Did Galilee Experience a Settlement Crisis in the Mid-Fourth Century?" in *Jewish Identities in Late Antiquity, Studies in Memory of Menahem Stern*, ed. Lee I. Levine and Daniel R. Schwartz (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 296–313.

(wine and oil presses), architectural fragments, burial caves, and quarried cist tombs scattered around the site and its periphery.<sup>28</sup>

Related research included surveys of nearby Sheikh Nashi, a hill located 400 m to the east of Huqoq that possessed natural defenses, the remains of a Hellenistic fortification at its summit, and numerous agricultural and water installations. These two settlements clearly had an important relationship throughout antiquity, but the precise nature of that relationship is still uncertain; they both had access to 'Ein Huqoq (the natural spring at the northern base of the site), shared use of surrounding agricultural lands, and were occupied contemporaneously.<sup>29</sup> Some scholars have suggested that Sheikh Nashi (with its natural and artificial defenses) was a military camp supported by Huqoq (with its easier access to the spring) as a civilian settlement,<sup>30</sup> but this intriguing possibility has not yet been verified.

In summary, archaeological explorations and surveys have confirmed and clarified the outline of Huqoq's history found in the literary sources: It appears from the material remains that the site was occupied in the biblical period and expanded in the Late Hellenistic period (possibly in connection with a military camp at Sheikh Nashi) and that significant growth occurred during the Roman-Byzantine period as attested by pottery, agricultural installations, tombs, and architectural fragments belonging to a monumental synagogue. Huqoq then seems to have declined in the early Islamic period, was resettled as the Muslim village of 'Yaquq by the Middle Ages, and was abandoned for the last time in 1948; since that time it has remained uninhabited.

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28. Leibner, *Settlement and History*, 151.

29. Lissovsky, "Hukkok," 105; Leibner, *Settlement and History*, 155-58.

30. This suggestion was first made by Albrecht Alt in 1931 following his visit to the site; see Albrecht Alt, "Das Institut in den Jahren 1929 und 1930," *Palästinajahrbuch* 27 (1931): 5-50, esp. 40n2; cf. Tepper, Dar'in, and Tepper, *Naḥal 'Amud District*, 25, 45.

## Archaeological Research at Huqoq— The Huqoq Excavation Project

Huqoq's occupational history, the scattering of ancient remains on its surface, its current accessibility, and the fact that it was previously unexcavated made it an ideal location for systematic archaeological research into ancient Galilean village life. These observations led Jodi Magness (UNC-Chapel Hill)—later joined by Shua Kisilevitz (Israel Antiquities Authority)—to organize the Huqoq Excavation Project (HEP) in 2010 and direct the first two seasons of formal excavation in 2011 and 2012. The initial goals of the HEP were threefold: (1) locate and excavate the village's ancient synagogue in hopes of clarifying current debates on the dating of monumental synagogue buildings in the region; (2) excavate a portion of the ancient Jewish village to establish a context for the synagogue and to refine the local pottery chronology; and (3) preserve the history of the pre-1948 village of 'Yaquq by excavating a portion of it and by interviewing the descendants of the village's last inhabitants. The HEP is now only into its third year of research, but these goals are already being met and exceeded in numerous ways. Because this article focuses on Huqoq's ancient past, we will briefly summarize the findings of the 2011-2012 excavation seasons as they relate to the ancient village and synagogue. Fuller preliminary reports of the entire project can be found elsewhere.<sup>31</sup>

### The Ancient Village

One of the most important components of the HEP in its first two seasons was the excavation of the ancient village of Huqoq (Area 2000), supervised by Chad Spigel (Trinity University, TX). Initial

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31. Jodi Magness, "Huqoq—2011 Preliminary Report," *Excavations and Surveys in Israel (Hadashot Arkheologiyot)* 124 (2012); Jodi Magness, Shua Kisilevitz, Matthew Grey, Chad Spigel, and Brian Coussens, "Huqoq—2012 Preliminary Report," *Excavations and Surveys in Israel (Hadashot Arkheologiyot)* 125 (2013); for additional and more popularized reports, see Matthew J. Grey, "Excavating an Ancient Jewish Village near the Sea of Galilee," *BYU Religious Education Review* 5/1 (2012): 6-7; and Jodi Magness, "Samson in the Synagogue," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 39/1 (2013): 32-39, 66-67.

surveys of the site suggested that the modern remains of 'Yaquq partially overlapped ancient Huqoq, with its blocks of houses, internal courtyards, and alleyways possibly preserving some of the layout of the ancient village below. It also appeared that the ancient village extended to the south of the modern remains, thus providing an area with more direct access to earlier periods. Therefore, excavations began in the southeast quadrant of the site in hopes of uncovering a portion of the ancient village, understanding the context of the nearby synagogue, providing new data to refine the chronology of the local pottery, and gleaning new insights into ancient Galilean village life.<sup>32</sup>

In 2011 and 2012, village excavations focused on a structure containing rooms around courtyards, separated by well-constructed stone walls. Just below the modern surface, these rooms contained rubble collapse and soil mixed with Byzantine, Mamluk, and Ottoman period pottery.<sup>33</sup> Once these layers were cleared, the floors of the building were revealed; the pottery associated with the floors dates to the Byzantine period (fifth or sixth century CE). Coins, animal bones, glass, and large quantities of restorable pottery (including imported Late Roman red wares) were also found in the rooms. It appears that one of these rooms was eventually converted into a stable and that other rooms were used for agricultural or industrial activity, as attested by numerous grinding stones, loom weights, press weights, crushed olive pits, and a roof roller. Fills of soil below the floors and walls of these rooms contain pottery and other finds dating to the Bronze Age, Iron Age, and Persian and Hellenistic periods, but excavations have not yet uncovered architectural remains from these earlier periods.<sup>34</sup>

The team also explored, examined, and excavated other features of the ancient village in 2011 and 2012. In initial surveys of the site,

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32. Magness, "Huqoq—2011."

33. Magness, "Huqoq—2011."

34. The earliest and most intriguing find from these early periods was a white stone mace head likely dating to the Early Bronze Age. For this discovery and other data pertaining to the structure, see Magness et al., "Huqoq—2012," and Magness, "Samson in the Synagogue," 33–34.

cist graves, rock-cut tombs, and agricultural installations—including remains of wine and oil presses—were found scattered around the site and its periphery.<sup>35</sup> These are difficult to date with precision, but they resemble features of other Roman-era sites. One feature studied as part of the HEP is a cistern and underground hiding complex in the center of the village. The cistern is located in Area 3000 near the synagogue (see below) and reaches a depth of 8.5 m. It was explored and mapped by Yinon Shvitiel (Safed College), who discovered three underground hiding tunnels branching off from the subterranean cistern. Shvitiel suggests that these tunnels share characteristics with hiding complexes used by villagers for protection during the Jewish revolts against Rome in 66-70 and 132-35 CE, perhaps indicating Huqoq's involvement in one or both of those wars.<sup>36</sup>

Surveys also revealed the location of two large *miqua'ot* (Jewish ritual baths) hewn into the bedrock on the eastern and southern periphery of the village. The southern *miqueh* was excavated by the HEP in 2011 as Area 4000, supervised by Byron McCane (Wofford College). It contained a passage entering from the east consisting of twelve steps (five made of cut stone blocks and seven hewn into the bedrock, all with traces of wear in the center) and a rock-cut immersion room in a trapezoidal shape. A thin layer of silt that covered the floor contained Late Roman and Byzantine pottery, suggesting that the room ceased to function as a ritual bath in the Byzantine period when it was converted into a cistern.<sup>37</sup> This feature confirms that Huqoq retained its Jewish character through late antiquity and supports recent claims that ritual purity practices continued in some Jewish communities long after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 CE.<sup>38</sup>

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35. Magness, "Huqoq—2011."

36. Magness, "Huqoq—2011." For more of Shvitiel's work on ancient hiding complexes in Galilee, see Yinon Shvitiel, "Cliff Settlements, Shelters and Refuge Caves in the Galilee," in *In the Hill-Country, and in the Shephelah, and in the Arabah (Joshua 12, 8): Studies and Researches Presented to Adam Zertal in the Thirtieth Anniversary of the Manasseh Hill-Country Survey*, ed. Shay Bar (Jerusalem: Ariel Publishing House, 2008), 223-35.

37. Magness, "Huqoq—2011," and "Samson in the Synagogue," 34.

38. David Amit and Yonatan Adler, "The Observance of Ritual Purity after 70 CE: A Reevaluation of the Evidence in Light of Recent Archaeological Discoveries," in

## The Ancient Synagogue

One of the features that attracted the attention of explorers, surveyors, and archaeologists from the beginning was the clustering of finely carved architectural fragments and columns on a mound of rubble near the center of the site. The high quality of these pieces and the previous report of a lintel decorated with a menorah (now lost) suggested that a monumental synagogue once stood in the village. The location and excavation of this ancient synagogue became one of the primary objectives of the HEP, with hopes that it would shed needed light on current debates over synagogue typology and chronology in the Galilee region. To accomplish these objectives, excavations of the rubble mound (Area 3000) began in 2011 and continued in 2012 under the supervision of Matthew Grey (Brigham Young University).<sup>39</sup>

Because of the clustering of architectural pieces near the center of the site, the mound of rubble was the natural location to begin searching for the synagogue. An initial clearing of weeds along the west side of the mound revealed six large paving stones, two of which were part of a threshold. These limestone blocks were not *in situ*. However, they presumably did not move far from their original position, and they resembled similar features associated with courtyards and entryways of other known ancient synagogues, suggesting that Huqoq's synagogue was located nearby. Unfortunately, these blocks turned out to be surrounded by modern fill with no traces of the ancient building.<sup>40</sup> However, more successful excavations were conducted on the mound itself (closer to the clustered architectural fragments) and to its east near the cistern, which presumably was located in the synagogue's courtyard.

The mound is in a part of the ancient village covered by modern remains, so initial excavations uncovered portions of the pre-

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*"Follow the Wise": Studies in Jewish History and Culture in Honor of Lee I. Levine*, ed. Zeev Weiss, Oded Irshai, Jodi Magness, and Seth Schwartz (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2010), 121-43.

39. Magness, "Huqoq—2011."

40. Magness, "Huqoq—2011," and "Samson in the Synagogue," 34-35.

1948 village of ‘Yaquq.<sup>41</sup> The modern features excavated on the mound included a room that had collapsed and burned (apparently during the village’s evacuation in 1948), a courtyard and food production area around the cistern, and numerous small finds from the Ottoman and British Mandate periods, such as keys, bottles, coins, combs, sandals, clay pipes, and a musket barrel with thirty-two lead balls. In addition to modern remains, the rubble collapse and soil fills of the mound also contained material that pointed to a large and affluent ancient structure in the vicinity; these included pottery, tesserae (small mosaic cubes), clay roof tiles, coins, and a decorated rim of an imported marble basin.<sup>42</sup>

In 2011, while excavating the rubble and fill on the east side of the mound, we uncovered a massive limestone block, which at first appeared to be a paving stone for the synagogue’s courtyard. Further excavation, however, revealed that it was a large ashlar block in a wall running north-south. This turned out to be a portion of the east wall of the synagogue.<sup>43</sup> Excavations continued on both sides of the wall in 2012 in an effort to learn more about the synagogue’s dimensions, layout, and construction date. Outside the wall, we reached a thick and compacted layer of limestone building chips—pieces of stone from the wall’s construction and dressing—in the building’s foundation trench. The coins found inside and underneath this layer are still being identified, but pottery associated with the trench suggests a late fourth century *terminus post quem* for the synagogue’s construction.<sup>44</sup> This dating will be more precisely refined with further excavation and the identification of the coins.<sup>45</sup>

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41. The modern village excavations are also in Area 3000, with Brian Coussens (assistant area supervisor) and Tawfiq De’adle (consultant) overseeing its excavation, documentation, and preservation.

42. Magness, “Huqoq—2011”; Magness et al., “Huqoq—2012”; Magness, “Samson in the Synagogue,” 36.

43. Magness, “Huqoq—2011,” and “Samson in the Synagogue,” 35.

44. Magness et al., “Huqoq—2012.” Underneath the synagogue’s foundation trench is an earlier occupational phase attested by a column base, but excavations have not yet explored this level.

45. Magness, “Samson in the Synagogue,” 35–36.



Excavations inside the wall showed that the ancient synagogue building was renovated in some way during the Mamluk period, as attested by a cobblestone floor resting on top of a deep fill high above the original synagogue floor level. This fill contained pottery from the Late Roman, Byzantine, early Islamic, and Medieval periods. It also contained large quantities of fine tesserae, including clusters of colored cubes still bound together by chunks of plaster, indicating that at one point a lavish mosaic floor decorated the building's interior. However, the loose tesserae in the fill suggested that the mosaic below had been severely damaged at some point before the construction of the later Mamluk floor. Excavations also uncovered a layer of white plaster on the inside of the synagogue wall, but it bears no traces of decoration.<sup>46</sup>

By the end of the 2012 season, we reached the synagogue floor and uncovered the most exciting discovery of the HEP to date—a surviving portion of a beautiful mosaic containing figural decoration, geometric patterns, and an inscription.<sup>47</sup> The mosaic is fragmentary in this portion of the building, but the three surviving sections provide valuable insights into the religious activities of the community. The first section to be discovered was a pair of female faces flanking a medallion inscription. The face on the north side of the inscription is well preserved, showing a woman with wavy red hair and a white earring in her left ear. The face on the south side of the inscription is badly damaged, but shows a woman wearing a tiara (containing three green glass stones as its diadem) with her hair tied in a topknot.<sup>48</sup>

Although the identification of these women is uncertain, Karen Britt (the HEP mosaics specialist) has offered two possibilities: (1) the female faces, both with lotus flowers protruding from above

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46. Magness et al., “Huqoq—2012”; Orna Cohen—the site’s conservator—treated the plaster on the wall’s interior as well as the mosaic floor.

47. Magness, “Samson in the Synagogue,” 32, 36, points out that the volunteer who first discovered the mosaic was Bryan Bozung, a Brigham Young University alumnus who is currently a graduate student studying Second Temple Judaism at Yale University.

48. Magness et al., “Huqoq—2012,” and Magness, “Samson in the Synagogue,” 36.

them, could represent two of the four seasons, a motif depicted in other synagogue mosaics in the region; or (2) the faces, both encircled by *nimbi* or haloes, could be depictions of wealthy female donors from the synagogue congregation (a phenomenon known from Byzantine churches in the region). If the latter possibility is correct, the Huqoq mosaic would be the first known depiction of female donors to be found in a synagogue setting.<sup>49</sup> This interpretation is strengthened by the orientation of the female faces toward the medallion inscription, which promises blessings to those (such as donors?) who perform good deeds.<sup>50</sup>

The mosaic inscription is in Hebrew or Aramaic and is written with white letters against a black background. It once contained six lines but is now badly damaged, leaving large gaps in the text and requiring extensive reconstruction. David Amit reconstructed the inscription in Hebrew as follows (restored portions are in brackets):<sup>51</sup>

- |   |                    |
|---|--------------------|
| 1. [And blessed                             | [וברוכין]          |
| 2. [are all of the people of the town?] who | [כל בני העיר?] שהן |
| 3. adhere to all                            | מתחזקין בכל        |
| 4. commandments. So may be                  | מצות כן יהא        |
| 5. your labor and Ame[n Se]lla[h]           | [עמלכן ואמן ס]לה   |
| 6. [P]eace                                  | [ש]לום             |

In addition to promising rewards to those who keep the commandments, a portion of the inscription (“so may be your labor”) resembles a midrash on Ecclesiastes 6:7 that contrasts the deeds

49. For depictions of female donors in Byzantine church mosaics in Israel and Jordan, see Karen Britt, “Fama et Memoria: Portraits of Female Patrons in Mosaic Pavements of Churches in Byzantine Palestine and Arabia,” *Medieval Feminist Forum* 44/2 (2008): 119–43.

50. Magness, “Samson in the Synagogue,” 38; Karen Britt, “The Huqoq Synagogue Mosaics,” at [www.biblicalarchaeology.org/huqoqmosaics](http://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/huqoqmosaics) (accessed 24 June 2013).

51. Magness, “Samson in the Synagogue,” 38. For detailed analysis and interpretation of this inscription, see David Amit, “Mosaic Inscription from a Synagogue Mosaic at Horvat Huqoq,” at [www.biblicalarchaeology.org/huqoqmosaics](http://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/huqoqmosaics) (accessed 24 June 2013).

performed by humans with the gifts bestowed by God.<sup>52</sup> If a relationship does exist between this image and text, it might be significant that the midrash tells an illustrative parable of a villager marrying a woman of royal lineage,<sup>53</sup> a scene possibly recalled by the depictions of elite women flanking the inscription.

A second section of the mosaic survives along the wall and likely wraps around the outer edge of the entire synagogue floor. It contains a large white band closest to the wall, with black borders and a colorful three-stand guilloche (braid) pattern. The mosaic is damaged beyond the borders of the guilloche, but remnants of black frames and hints of animal features suggest that figural scenes once existed closer to the hall's interior. One of these scenes contained a feline (indicated by the tip of its ear) and another possibly contained a donkey (indicated by its mane and tail).<sup>54</sup>

Before the end of the 2012 season, a third section of the mosaic was uncovered in close proximity to the others. It depicts the torso of a large male figure dressed in Late Roman military garb, including a white tunic and red cloak. The tunic was adorned with an *orbiculum* (roundel)—an apotropaic symbol worn by soldiers in the Late Roman army to ward off evil—and cinched by a thick decorated belt. Unfortunately, the head of this figure did not survive, and there is no identifying inscription. However, near the soldier's feet there is a depiction of two pairs of foxes tied together by their

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52. This observation is made by Amit, "Mosaic Inscription." The possible parallel passage in *Ecclesiastes Rabbah* 6:7 reads, "R. Samuel said: However man toils and accumulates [merit for the performance of] the precepts and good deeds in this world, it is insufficient [to requite the boon granted him by God of] the breath which comes from his mouth." This translation is from Abraham Cohen, *Midrash Rabbah: Ecclesiastes* (London: Soncino, 1983), 161.

53. "R. Hanina b. Isaac said: All that a man toils for precepts and good deeds is FOR HIS MOUTH . . . [but] the soul is aware that whatever it toils for is for itself and therefore never has enough of Torah and good deeds. To what may the matter be likened? To a villager who married a woman of royal lineage. Though he bring her everything in the world, it is not esteemed by her at all. Why? Because she is a king's daughter [and is used to comforts]. So it is with the soul; though you bring it all the luxuries in the world, they are nothing to it. Why? Because it is of heavenly origin" (*Ecclesiastes Rabbah* 6:7).

54. Magness et al., "Huqoq—2012," and Magness, "Samson in the Synagogue," 38.

tails to lighted torches. This identifies the scene as a depiction of Samson exacting retribution against the Philistines by tying three hundred foxes in pairs to torches and releasing them into nearby agricultural fields, a story told in Judges 15:1-5.<sup>55</sup>

The significance of this find is still being researched, but it is clearly a rare and important contribution to the study of ancient synagogue art and liturgy. Because of prohibitions of figural decoration in rabbinic literature during this period, the presence of such motifs in synagogue art has long been a surprising phenomenon. Scholars traditionally thought that ancient Judaism was aniconic on the assumption that most Jews followed the rulings of the rabbis as found in Talmudic texts. However, synagogue excavations from recent decades have shown that many Jewish communities in late antiquity either ignored or violated rabbinic rulings and used human, animal, and cosmic art in their synagogue worship.<sup>56</sup> These mosaics reveal strands of Jewish thought and practice that seem to have existed outside (or at least on the margins) of rabbinic Judaism, showing that this was a time before the legal rulings of the rabbis were normative. Therefore, the Huqoq mosaic appears to reflect a popular (nonrabbinic) expression of religiosity, adds to a growing corpus of figural images depicted in ancient synagogues, and further attests to the diversity of Jewish thought in this period. It is particularly interesting because of the rarity of Samson imagery in ancient Jewish art.

### **Samson in Byzantine Galilee—A Messianic Prototype?**

As exciting as it is to have found such a rare Samson image at Huqoq, this mosaic is not the first depiction of the biblical judge found in a synagogue; it is the second. The first was found a few years earlier in a synagogue at Wadi Hamam, a contemporary Jewish village

55. Magness et al., “Huqoq—2012,” and Magness, “Samson in the Synagogue,” 38-39.

56. For an overview of scholarship on early Jewish synagogue art, see Lee I. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 593-612.

only 5 km south of Huqoq. There, alongside other images of Israel's biblical triumphs—including the drowning of Pharaoh's army in the Red Sea and the building of the Jerusalem temple—the mosaic floor depicts Samson dressed in military garb, killing Philistines with the jawbone of an ass (Judges 15:14-17).<sup>57</sup> This scene, along with the illustration of the foxes at Huqoq, recalls the biblical stories of Samson wreaking havoc among Israel's ancient Philistine enemies. Together, the mosaics at Huqoq and Wadi Hamam are the only known images of Samson to appear in synagogues (or any other Jewish context) in Israel.<sup>58</sup> The discovery of these two rare images—both in synagogues dating to the Late Roman/Byzantine periods and located in close proximity by the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee—raises an important question: Why would Jewish villages in late antique Galilee have had such an interest in the story of Samson?<sup>59</sup>

The answer is not immediately obvious. Samson had no historical ties to the region; his biblical exploits among the Philistines occurred far to the south, and he belonged to the Israelite tribe of Dan, which settled to the north.<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, rabbinic literature

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57. Uzi Leibner and Shulamit Miller, "A Figural Mosaic in the Synagogue at Khirbet Wadi Hamam," *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 23/1 (2010): 238-64.

58. There is a Byzantine period structure in Mopsuestia (Misis) that had a mosaic floor depicting an entire cycle of Samson scenes from Judges 14-16 in its northern side aisle, including Samson and the foxes (scene III), Samson killing Philistines (scene IV), and accompanying verses from the Septuagint. However, it is unclear if this building was a synagogue or a church. For arguments in favor of the latter, see Ludwig Budde, *Antike Mosaiken in Kilikien, I* (Recklinghausen: Bongers, 1969); and Ernst Kitzinger, "Observations on the Samson Floor at Mopsuestia," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 27 (1973): 133-44. Arguments for the building being a synagogue can be found in Michael Aviyonah, "The Mosaics of Mopsuestia—Church or Synagogue?" in *Ancient Synagogues Revealed*, ed. Lee I. Levine (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1981), 186-90.

59. The following discussion summarizes a more detailed study that will be published in Matthew J. Grey, "'The Redeemer to Arise from the House of Dan': Samson, Apocalypticism, and Messianic Hopes in Late Antique Galilee," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* (forthcoming).

60. Elchanan Reiner and David Amit, "Samson Follows the Sun to Galilee," *Ha'aretz*, 6 October 2012, claim that local Galilean tradition viewed Samson's exploits as occurring in this region, but the evidence they have published so far is thin and unconvincing. Perhaps their future publications will more clearly articulate and strengthen this suggestion.

from this period consistently reflects a negative view of Samson by emphasizing his moral failings, using his sexual transgressions as a warning against marrying Gentiles, and claiming that he was punished by God for his sins.<sup>61</sup> Because of their critical attitude toward Samson, rabbinic texts do not explain his appearance in synagogue mosaics or how he was publicly celebrated in Galilee. Nevertheless, something about the stories of Samson's victories over the Philistines resonated with some Jewish communities in eastern Lower Galilee, thus begging the question of Samson's significance in the region.

Ongoing research into this question suggests that the Samson mosaics at Huqoq and Wadi Hamam may have been intended to serve as apocalyptic or messianic images—biblical stories used by these communities to foster hope in Israel's eschatological redemption. Traditionally, scholars assumed that apocalypticism and messianism—worldviews that flourished in the late Second Temple period (ca. 200 BCE to 70 CE)<sup>62</sup>—ended with the failure of the Jewish revolts against Rome in the late first and early second centuries. However, recent studies have shown that this was not the case.<sup>63</sup> While some Jews (including rabbinic circles) did ignore, downplay, or discourage apocalyptic and messianic thought in the destructive wake of the revolts,<sup>64</sup> others continued to foster these

61. For example, *m. Sotah* 1:8 and *t. Sotah* 1:8 provide examples of how Samson was divinely punished for his attraction to foreign women, including the claim that Samson lost his sight because he followed the lust of his eyes by marrying a Philistine (cf. *Genesis Rabbah* 67:13, 85:6; *Numbers Rabbah* 9:24); *b. Sotah* 10b similarly describes Samson as a cripple who was cursed by God for his transgressions (cf. *b. Sanhedrin* 105a). For more on the negative assessment of Samson in rabbinic literature, see Shimon Fogel, "Samson's Shoulders Were Sixty Cubits': Three Issues about Samson's Image in the Eyes of the Rabbis" (MA thesis, Ben-Gurion University, 2009) [Hebrew] and Richard G. Marks, "Dangerous Hero: Rabbinic Attitudes toward Legendary Warriors," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 54 (1983): 181-94.

62. For an overview of early Jewish apocalypticism, see John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998).

63. John C. Reeves, *Trajectories in Near Eastern Apocalyptic: A Postrabbinic Jewish Apocalypse Reader* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), 1.

64. Rabbinic statements that discourage apocalyptic and messianic speculation include *t. Abodah Zarah* 1:19; *y. Berakhot* 1:1, 2c; *b. Sanhedrin* 97b; *Ecclesiastes Rabbah* 11:5-29. For discussion of early rabbinic resistance to apocalypticism and messianism,

hopes throughout the Late Roman, Byzantine, and early Islamic periods. As in the Second Temple period, a series of historical events from the third to seventh centuries—including the rise of Imperial Christianity, the fall of the Jewish Patriarchate, the Byzantine-Persian wars, and the Muslim conquest of Palestine—kept strands of apocalyptic thought alive and continually prompted Jewish communities to reimagine the eschatological scenario that would bring messianic redemption to Israel.<sup>65</sup>

As it turns out, much of this apocalyptic fervor flourished in eastern Lower Galilee, the region in which the villages of Huqoq and Wadi Hamam are located. There, some Jews imagined apocalyptic scenarios in which key messianic events would occur in the vicinity of Tiberias and Mount Arbel, about 12 km south of Huqoq.<sup>66</sup> These included local traditions that messianic instruments and figures (including Elijah's "staff of salvation" and the Josephite messiah) would emerge from Tiberias to begin the eschatological drama, that Armilos (the Jewish antichrist figure) would wage the battle of Gog and Magog in the Arbel Valley, and that the Davidic messiah would descend upon Mount Arbel to deliver Israel from its enemies, restore Jewish sovereignty, and rebuild the Jerusalem tem-

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see Michael Avi-Yonah, *The Jews of Palestine: A Political History from the Bar Kokhba War to the Arab Conquest* (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), 69-71; Joseph Dan, "Armilus: The Jewish Antichrist and the Origins and Dating of the Sefer Zerubbavel," in *Toward the Millennium: Messianic Expectations from the Bible to Waco*, ed. Peter Schafer and Mark Cohen (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 73-104, esp. 75; Moshe Idel, *Messianic Mystics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 42-45; Oded Irshai, "Dating the Eschaton: Jewish and Christian Apocalyptic Calculations in Late Antiquity," in *Apocalyptic Time*, ed. Albert I. Baumgarten (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 113-53 (esp. 124, 129, 136).

65. For more on Jewish apocalypticism in late antiquity, see Reeves, *Trajectories in Near Eastern Apocalyptic*; Avraham Grossman, "Jerusalem in Jewish Apocalyptic Literature," in *The History of Jerusalem: The Early Muslim Period, 638-1099*, ed. Joshua Prawer and Haggai Ben-Shammai (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 295-310; Irshai, "Dating the Eschaton," 135, 139-53; Oded Irshai, "The Earthquake in the Valley of Arbel: A Galilean Apocalyptic Tradition, Its Historical Context and Liturgical Commemorative Setting," *Jerusalem Studies in Hebrew Literature and Folklore* 25 (2012): 1-26 [Hebrew].

66. See Robert L. Wilken, *The Land Called Holy: Palestine in Christian History and Thought* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 207-8; Reeves, *Trajectories in Near Eastern Apocalyptic*, 29-39.

ple.<sup>67</sup> This regional apocalypticism made Tiberias and its environs the center of nationalistic and messianic movements that sought to overthrow the Byzantine Christian Empire and to reenthroned the Jewish priesthood.<sup>68</sup>

In this regional atmosphere of nationalism, localized apocalyptic hopes, and messianic speculation, depictions of Samson wreaking havoc among the Philistines easily could have had contemporary social, political, and religious significance; a biblical warrior who was born “to deliver Israel” (Judges 13:5) and who fought against an occupying force may have resonated with Galilean Jews who saw themselves as being under foreign occupation and who anxiously awaited their own deliverance. Such an interpretation of the Samson mosaics at Huqoq and Wadi Hamam—both within view of Tiberias and Mount Arbel—is supported by the fact that liturgical texts used in synagogues during this period refer to Samson in light of apocalyptic expectations and point to him as a biblical prototype of the eschatological messiah.

Synagogue art and liturgy in this period often facilitated popular messianic hopes by using biblical stories of Israel’s past triumphs to encourage faith in God’s future redemption of the community. These sometimes included depictions of David’s victories

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67. These traditions are reflected in the *Sefer Zerubbabel*, an apocalyptic text containing material from the third through seventh centuries CE. For its full text and translation, see Martha Himmelfarb, “Sefer Zerubbabel,” in *Rabbinic Fantasies: Imaginative Narratives from Classical Hebrew Literature*, ed. David Stern and Mark Jay Mirsky (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), 67–90; and Reeves, *Trajectories in Near Eastern Apocalyptic*, 51–66. For historical commentary, see Dan, “Armilus,” 73–104.

68. Events reflecting the activities of these movements include the involvement of Tiberian priests in Julian’s project to rebuild the Jerusalem temple in 363, an attempt led by priests from Galilee to restore Jewish Jerusalem under the Empress Eudocia in the mid-fifth century, and an attempt by Tiberian priests in the early sixth century to establish an independent state in Yemen. Sources from this period also indicate that these nationalist priestly circles from Tiberias included apocalyptic visionaries who speculated on the timing of the messiah’s arrival; see Oded Irshai, “Confronting a Christian Empire: Jewish Culture in the World of Byzantium,” in *Cultures of the Jews: A New History*, ed. David Biale (New York: Schocken, 2002), 180–220 (esp. 193, 207–9); and Matthew J. Grey, *Jewish Priests and the Social History of Post-70 Palestine* (PhD diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2011), 291–98.



or Ezekiel's vision of communal restoration on synagogue walls and floors,<sup>69</sup> as well as prayers and poetry recited in synagogue worship services that expressed hope for future messianic redemption by recalling past episodes of God's deliverance.<sup>70</sup> A survey of liturgical texts used in Galilee during this period indicates that some congregations drew upon the story of Samson to foster such hopes in their worship, thus helping to elucidate his appearance in synagogue mosaics in the region.

For example, Samson's triumphs are evoked in the so-called *Hellenistic Synagogal Prayers*, a collection of third-century Jewish prayers from Palestine that were preserved in the Christian *Apostolic Constitutions* (compiled in fourth-century Syria).<sup>71</sup> Prayer 6 of

69. For these and other similar images on the wall frescoes at Dura Europos, see Carl H. Kraeling, *The Excavations at Dura Europos, VIII Part I: The Synagogue* (New York: KTAV, 1979), 66-239; Erwin R. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman World* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1953-68), 9:129, 10:74-97; and Kära L. Schenk, "Temple, Community, and Sacred Narrative in the Dura-Europos Synagogue," *Association for Jewish Studies Review* 34/2 (2010): 195-229. For "messianic" images of David in synagogue mosaics at Gaza and Meroth, see Alexei M. Sivertsev, *Judaism and Imperial Ideology in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 172-212; Mosche Barasch, "The David Mosaic of Gaza," in *Assaph: Studies in Art History* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 1980), 1:1-42; and Zvi Ilan and Emmanuel Damati, *Meroth: The Ancient Jewish Village* (Tel Aviv: Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel, 1987), 53-56 [Hebrew].

70. Many of the hopes fostered by apocalyptic circles found popular expression in the blessings of the *'Amidah*, the central prayer in late antique synagogue worship. These include petitions for the (re)appearance of a Davidic monarch, the restoration of Jewish Jerusalem, and the rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple; see Joseph Heineemann, *Prayer in the Talmud* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1977), 222-24; and Wilken, *Land Called Holy*, 137-38. By the fifth century, the blessings of the *'Amidah* were supplemented or replaced by liturgical poetry (*piyyutim*) that often reflected popular messianic folklore and Galilean apocalyptic traditions; see Joseph Yahalom, "The Temple and the City in Liturgical Hebrew Poetry," in Prawer and Ben-Shammai, *History of Jerusalem*, 270-94 (esp. 275-76), and Joseph Yahalom, *Poetry and Society in Jewish Galilee of Late Antiquity* (Tel Aviv: Hikibbutz Hameuchad, 1999) [Hebrew].

71. The Greek text of the prayers can be found in Marcel Metzger, *Les constitutions apostoliques, Tome III (Livres VII et VIII)*, Sources Chrétiennes 336 (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1987), 86-88. For the standard English translation, see D. A. Fiensy and D. R. Darnell, "Hellenistic Synagogal Prayers," in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (New York: Doubleday, 1985), 2:671-97. Historical and textual analysis of these prayers can be found in David A. Fiensy, *Prayers Alleged to Be Jewish: An Examination of the Constitutiones Apostolorum* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985).

fers petitions for God to restore the Davidic monarchy, Zion, and the temple, and to hear the prayers of the congregation. To encourage hope in the fulfillment of these petitions, the prayer lists many of Israel's biblical heroes (including Moses, David, and Elijah) who were filled with God's power and who stand as evidence that God can perform similar miracles in the future. Along with these legendary figures, the prayer mentions "Sampson, in his thirst before his error," as an example of God's ability to assist Israel in the past and to fulfill eschatological hopes.<sup>72</sup> Similarly, Prayer 7 lists "the days of the Judges" (implicitly including Samson) as an example of God's mercy, compassion, and deliverance "generation after generation."<sup>73</sup>

Samson is not the central figure in these prayers, just as he is not the central figure on the mosaic floors at Huqoq and Wadi Hamam. Rather, he is one of many biblical heroes whose valiant acts epitomize God's intervention on behalf of Israel. Yet, by recalling his divine strength and his success in fighting against the Philistines, the prayers use Samson and "the (other) Judges" as evidence that God can hearken to the requests for national redemption offered by the congregation. These prayers show that some congregations liturgically celebrated the feats Samson accomplished "before his error" (his relationship with Delilah) as an example of God's power to assist the community. The probable origin of these texts in Palestine during the Late Roman period suggests that the synagogue congregations at Huqoq and Wadi Hamam may have uttered such prayers—illustrated by their mosaic floors—as a part of their worship services.<sup>74</sup>

Other liturgical texts go beyond this general use of the Samson story and point to Samson as a biblical type of the coming messiah. This theme is most prominent in the Palestinian targums—Aramaic translations of the Hebrew Bible used in synagogue liturgy in late

72. Fiensy and Darnell, "Hellenistic Synagogal Prayers," 684–85; *Hellenistic Synagogal Prayer* 6.1–2, 7 (*Apostolic Constitutions* 7.37.1–5).

73. Fiensy and Darnell, "Hellenistic Synagogal Prayers," 685–86; *Hellenistic Synagogal Prayer* 7.2–5 (*Apostolic Constitutions* 7.38.1–8).

74. For the dating and provenance of these prayers, see Fiensy, *Prayers Alleged to Be Jewish*, 209–42.

antique Galilee<sup>75</sup>—which present Samson as a divinely empowered deliverer of the past who prefigures the future Davidic messiah. The association between Samson and the messiah is introduced in the targumic expansions of Genesis 49, the biblical account in which Jacob pronounces over each son a symbolic blessing meant to foreshadow the destinies of the twelve tribes. *Targums Neofiti* and *Pseudo-Jonathan* expand the sequence by promising that these blessings would reveal God's plans for Israel's eschatological redemption.<sup>76</sup>

After blessing Judah with the promise that the Davidic messiah would come through his lineage (expanding the text of Genesis 49:8-12), Jacob blesses Dan that his tribe would also produce a national deliverer (פְּרוֹקֵא)<sup>77</sup> whose acts of redemption would be temporary, but who would foreshadow the ultimate messiah from Judah:

*From those of the house of Dan shall redemption arise, and a judge. Together, all the tribes of the sons of Israel shall obey him. This shall be the redeemer who is to arise from the house of Dan; he will be strong, exalted above all nations. He will be compared to the serpent that lies on the ground, and to a venomous serpent that lies in wait at the crossroads, that bites the horses in the heels and out of fear of it the rider turns around and falls backward. He is Samson bar Manoah, the dread of whom is upon his enemies and fear of whom is upon those who hate him. He goes out to war against those that hate him and kills kings together with rulers. (Targum Neofiti Genesis 49:16-18)<sup>78</sup>*

75. For a detailed overview of scholarship on the targums, see Paul V. M. Flesher and Bruce Chilton, *The Targums: A Critical Introduction* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2011).

76. *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* Genesis 49:1, cited in Michael Maher, *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: Genesis* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 157; cf. *Targum Neofiti* Genesis 49:1, cited in Martin McNamara, *Targum Neofiti 1: Genesis* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 215-16.

77. For uses of the term פְּרוֹקֵא and its variants in reference to redemption or a redeemer figure, see Marcus Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* (New York: Judaica Press, 1996), 1148 and 1221.

78. McNamara, *Targum Neofiti*, 221-22; the italicized words and phrases represent targumic expansions of or alterations to the biblical text.

*From those of the house of Dan there shall arise a man who will judge his people with true judgments. As one, the tribes of Israel will obey him. There will be a man who will be chosen and who will arise from those of the house of Dan. He will be comparable to the adder that lies at the crossroads and to the heads of the serpents that lie in wait by the path, biting the horses in the heel, and out of fear of it the rider falls, turning backwards. Thus shall Samson, son of Manoah, kill all the warriors of the Philistines, both horsemen and foot soldiers. He will hamstring their horses and throw their riders backwards. (Targum Pseudo-Jonathan Genesis 49:16-18)<sup>79</sup>*

According to this tradition, Samson is the venomous snake of Dan who would save Israel by biting the horse's heel and causing its rider (the Philistines) to fall backwards. Although Samson would not be the messiah because his deliverance would only be "the redemption of an hour" (i.e., temporary),<sup>80</sup> he demonstrated that God could save Israel from its oppressive enemies, just as many Jews in Byzantine Galilee hoped the messiah would do in their own lifetime.<sup>81</sup>

Another passage in *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* also highlights Samson in this way and situates his victories in an apocalyptic context. In its expansion of Deuteronomy 34:1-3 (Moses's view of the tribal allotments in the promised land), the targum describes Moses's vision of biblical deliverers who would come from the tribes of Israel and demonstrate God's power to fight Israel's eschatological battles. Among these heroes, Samson is again mentioned

79. Maher, *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*, 160.

80. *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* Genesis 49:16-18, cited in Maher, *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*, 160; cf. *Genesis Rabbah* 98:14.

81. According to some scholars, the targumic expansion of Dan's blessing to refer to Samson was intended to be a "poem of messianic expectation," presenting Samson as a "messiah figure in miniature" who was sent by God at a time when Israel's existence was at stake; see Roger Syren, *The Blessings in the Targums: A Study on the Targumic Interpretations of Genesis 49 and Deuteronomy 33* (Abo: Abo Akademi, 1986), 76-77, 81, 113-15; Matthew Black, *An Aramaic Approach to the Gospels and Acts* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967; repr. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998), 305-9.

as a divinely empowered warrior from the tribe of Dan who instills hope in Israel's ultimate redemption:

And *the Memra of the Lord* showed [Moses] all *the strong ones of the land . . . and the victories of Samson, son of Manoah, from the tribe of Dan . . . and all the kings of Israel and the kings of the house of Judah that ruled until the last Temple was destroyed . . . and the oppression of each successive generation [of Israel], and the punishment of Armalgos, the wicked, and the wars of Gog. But in the time of their great privation, Michael will arise to redeem with his (strong) arm.* (*Targum Pseudo-Jonathan Deuteronomy 34:1-3*)<sup>82</sup>

Once again, the targum encourages the congregation to trust in a messianic future by listing key biblical victories—including those of Samson the Danite—as evidence that God can deliver the congregation out of its current “oppression” just as he had for “each successive generation.”

These sources indicate that synagogue congregations in Syria-Palestine during late antiquity liturgically celebrated the exploits of Samson as an example of God's power to deliver Israel in the past and as a demonstration of his ability to do so again. This represents a much different view of the biblical judge than is present in rabbinic literature, which largely focused on Samson's moral transgressions. Whereas many rabbis apparently viewed Samson as a failed messiah whose death was a curse from God,<sup>83</sup> other Jewish circles saw Samson as a successful (if temporary) redeemer of the past who foreshadowed the eschatological messiah. Between these two views, the synagogue congregations at Wadi Hamam and Huqoq clearly showed an affinity with the tradition that viewed Samson as a protomessianic figure by depicting Samson as a military hero and celebrating his victories.

82. Ernest G. Clarke, *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: Deuteronomy* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998), 104.

83. See Marks, “Dangerous Hero,” 181–94, and Shimon Fogel, “Samson as Messiah—Another Look,” *Jewish Studies Internet Journal* 11 (2012): 1–25 [Hebrew].

Considered together, the synagogue mosaics and liturgical texts seem to reflect a popular messianic view of Samson that was at odds with the negative assessment of Samson that existed in rabbinic circles. This popular view was particularly at home in the apocalyptic atmosphere of eastern Lower Galilee during the third through seventh centuries, when some Jews in the vicinity of Tiberias eagerly anticipated the overthrow of the Roman/Byzantine Empire and the divine restoration of Jewish sovereignty. Based on this confluence of evidence, it is reasonable to conclude that the congregations at Huqoq and Wadi Hamam viewed Samson as a messianic type whose biblical victories fostered hope in Israel's imminent eschatological redemption. Although Samson is not the central figure in either mosaic (in both synagogues he is depicted in the aisles alongside other scenes), his exploits were part of a larger gallery of biblical stories that celebrated Israel's past triumphs and foreshadowed Israel's future deliverance.

## Conclusion

This article has summarized the past and current research relating to the village of Huqoq in the biblical and postbiblical periods. Historical references to the site, the early explorations and surveys of the village's ancient remains, and the work of the Huqoq Excavation Project (HEP) have illuminated our understanding of the site's history and enhanced our understanding of the socioreligious dynamics in ancient Galilee. In particular, recent excavations conducted by the HEP are making valuable contributions to ongoing scholarly debates regarding the dating of monumental synagogues in the region, the establishment of a local pottery typology, and the development of Jewish religious art in antiquity. This third contribution is dramatically represented by the recent discovery of a synagogue mosaic that depicts, among other things, Samson's biblical exploits among the Philistines. Although we do not yet know the full extent of this mosaic, it appears that this rare Samson image fits within the

context of localized apocalyptic traditions and elucidates the messianic hopes that existed in the vicinity of Tiberias.

Much work remains to be done in each of the research goals set by the HEP: the village requires more extensive excavation to continue refining Huqoq's stratigraphy and pottery types; further excavations under the synagogue's foundations and floor are required to clarify the precise date of the building's construction; and the remainder of the synagogue's mosaic floor must be uncovered to obtain a fuller understanding of Huqoq's religious activities. By the time this article is in print, the 2013 excavation season will have concluded and will likely have shed further light on each of these issues, providing more insights into ancient Jewish village life and perhaps additional clarity on the perceptions of Samson in Byzantine Galilee.

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**Editors' Note.** The HEP's 2013 season enjoyed great success. Among other discoveries, this year's excavation of the synagogue at Huqoq uncovered a second mosaic of Samson near the one discussed in this article. This second mosaic portrayed Samson carrying the gates of Gaza upon his shoulders (see Judges 16:3), with a (Philistine?) horse rider fleeing the scene. This suggests that the synagogue floor was decorated with a Samson cycle, similar to the church or synagogue mosaic floor found at Mopsuestia in Asia Minor (see n58 above), but previously unattested in Israel. Another mosaic discovered in the synagogue depicts warriors, elephants adorned with shields, an elderly man seated on a throne flanked by young men, and additional battle scenes, possibly representing a conflation of stories from the apocryphal books of 1-4 Maccabees. For preliminary notices, see Jason Brown, "Galilee Excavation Unearths Significant Discoveries," *The Universe*, 23 July 2013, 1, 3, and Jodi Magness, "New Mosaics from the Huqoq Synagogue," *Biblical Archeology Review* 39/5 (September-October 2013): 66-68.