

**Zeitschrift:** Judaica : Beiträge zum Verstehen des Judentums  
**Herausgeber:** Zürcher Institut für interreligiösen Dialog  
**Band:** 73 (2017)  
  
**Artikel:** The mosaic panel with the warlike scenes and figurative arcade in the ancient synagogue at Huqoq : context and meaning  
**Autor:** Ovadiah, Asher / Pierri, Rosario  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-961035>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 03.09.2025

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

# The Mosaic Panel with the Warlike Scenes and Figurative Arcade in the Ancient Synagogue at Huqoq: Context and Meaning

By Asher Ovadiab and Rosario Pierri\*

## *Abstract*

*The mosaic panel under discussion was discovered in a mid-fifth century CE synagogue at Huqoq, an ancient Jewish village in Lower Galilee, near the Sea of Galilee. The panel consists of three registers featuring unusual and unique non-biblical representations, and constituting an integral part of the synagogue's other mosaic panels with biblical scenes. The three registers include warlike scenes with battle elephants and a figurative nine-arched arcade. The scenes raise interest and curiosity and were probably adopted from apocryphal and / or other historical sources, with the intention of stressing their symbolic, memorial and didactic significance.*

*The depictions appear to present historical events, translated into a visual language for the benefit of the synagogue congregants. It is plausible that the intention of the leaders of the Huqoq community was to express visually the symbolic / allegorical and didactic aspects of the representations, both recalling and perpetuating the past of the Jewish world and emphasizing the Jewish identity. The commemoration of the Maccabean revolt, more than six hundred years after it had broken out, and its allegorical visualization in the mosaic floor of the mid-fifth century CE synagogue at Huqoq, indicate the existence of a Jewish collective memory in Late Antiquity. Moreover, the victory of the Maccabees over the Seleucids and the achievement of religious freedom and political independence, seem also to signify the victory of Judaism over those that sought to oppress it. These depictions, together with the other biblical scenes found in the synagogue, probably played an important role in the daily life of the Jewish community at Huqoq, providing support and encouragement and raising Messianic hopes and expectations for a better future than that of the religious-political atmosphere that had prevailed in the fifth century CE.*

This mid-5<sup>th</sup>-century CE synagogue mosaic panel,<sup>1</sup> partially damaged, was fully uncovered in the course of the 2014 archaeological campaign at

---

\* Prof. em. Dr Asher Ovadiab, Tel Aviv University, Depts. of Art History and Classics; Prof. fra Rosario Pierri OFM, Studium Biblicum Franciscanum, Jerusalem.

1 The photograph of this mosaic panel has already been published online in the *National Geographic Magazine* (September 9<sup>th</sup>, 2016) and is included in the article by A. R. WILLIAMS: "Explore This Mysterious Mosaic – It may Portray Alexander the Great" (*National Geographic* 09.09.2016, online). Regrettably and unexpectedly, we have been informed, despite an earlier positive reply from the National Geographic authorities that we are not permitted to publish the image in

Huqoq,<sup>2</sup> an ancient Jewish village in Lower Galilee, near the Sea of Galilee. This unusual and unique mosaic panel constitutes an integral part of the synagogue's other high artistic quality mosaic panels. They include Samson carrying the gate of Gaza on his shoulders (Judg 16:3), Samson's foxes (Judg 15:4-5), Noah's Ark with pairs of animals (male and female) (Gen 7:2-3), and the crossing of the Red Sea, featuring Pharaoh's soldiers drowning with their horses and chariots (Exod 14:21-28). Such a rich and varied Jewish repertoire of visual elaboration of biblical stories, concentrated in the context of one religious Jewish building, has not been found to date in any other ancient synagogue, neither in the Land of Israel nor in the Diaspora. Biblical representations with symbolic, allegorical and didactic meaning<sup>3</sup> have, however, also been found in other synagogue mosaic pavements of Late Antiquity in the Land of Israel and the Diaspora: Beth Alpha – the Binding of Isaac;<sup>4</sup> Gaza Maiumas – King David as Orpheus;<sup>5</sup> Gerasa in Jordan – Noah's Ark;<sup>6</sup> Khirbet Susiyah – Daniel in the Lions' Den (?);<sup>7</sup> Meroth – the End of Days;<sup>8</sup> Misis (ancient Mopsuestia) in Cilicia, Asia

---

order to illustrate our article and facilitate the reader with an iconographic/ stylistic description and interpretation. For this reason, see the illustration in Williams' article.

- 2 J. MAGNESS, S. KISILEVITZ, M. GREY, C. SPIGEL, B. COUSSENS and K. BRITT, "Huqoq – 2013, Preliminary Report," in: חדשות ארכיאולוגיות *Hadashot Arkheologiyot* 126 (2014) online; J. MAGNESS, S. KISILEVITZ, M. GREY, C. SPIGEL, B. GORDON, B. COUSSENS and K. BRITT, "Huqoq – 2014, Preliminary Report," in: חדשות ארכיאולוגיות *Hadashot Arkheologiyot* 128 (2016) online, and more recently, WILLIAMS: "Explore This Mysterious Mosaic" (note 1).
- 3 Cf. R. OVADIAH and A. OVADIAH, *Hellenistic, Roman and Early Byzantine Mosaic Pavements in Israel* (Bibliotheca Archaeologica, vol. 6), Roma 1987, pp. 155-156, 160-161; A. OVADIAH, "Symbolism in Jewish and Christian Works of Art in Late Antiquity," in: ΔΕΛΤΙΟΝ ΤΗΣ ΧΡΙΣΤΙΑΝΙΚΗΣ ΑΡΧΑΙΟΛΟΓΙΚΗΣ ΕΤΑΙΡΕΙΑΣ 20 (1998), pp. 55-64, here pp. 55-57.
- 4 E. R. GOODENOUGH, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period*, 13 vols. (Bollingen Series, vol. 37), New York 1953–1968, vol. III (1953): *Illustrations* 631-632, 638.
- 5 OVADIAH and OVADIAH, *Mosaic Pavements* (note 3), Pls. LVIII-LIX, CLXXVIII; A. OVADIAH, "The Symbolic Meaning of the David-Orpheus Image in the Gaza Synagogue Mosaic," in: *Liber Annuus* 59 (2009), pp. 301-307.
- 6 C. H. KRAELING, *Gerasa – City of the Decapolis*, New Haven, CT 1938, Pls. LXIII-LXIV (a); GOODENOUGH, *Jewish Symbols* (note 4), vol. III (1953): *Illustration* 656.
- 7 OVADIAH and OVADIAH, *Mosaic Pavements* (note 3), p. 101.
- 8 A. OVADIAH and S. MUCZNIK, "The End of Days in the Mosaics of the Meroth Synagogue," in: D. PAUNIER and C. Schmidt (eds.), *La Mosaïque gréco-romaine*

Minor – Samson’s cycle and Noah’s Ark;<sup>9</sup> and Na‘aran – Daniel in the Lions’ Den;<sup>10</sup> as well as the Binding of Isaac, Exodus and the crossing of the Red Sea in the wall paintings of the 3<sup>rd</sup>-century CE synagogue at Dura Europos.<sup>11</sup>

### *Iconographic and Stylistic Aspects*<sup>12</sup>

The discussed panel consists of three registers, enclosed by two decorative borders – a scroll or wavy ribbon (B1)<sup>13</sup> on all four sides and a composite guilloche (B12)<sup>14</sup> on two sides (partially preserved). The representations in the registers include warlike scenes with battle elephants and a figurative nine-arched arcade. The scenes are of interest and arouse curiosity. Furthermore, to the best of our knowledge no similar depictions have been found in any other ancient synagogue in the Land of Israel or in the Diaspora.

The top register depicts, almost symmetrically, two groups of warriors, separated by two large, dominant, antithetic and antagonistic figures. They form the axis of the composition, their heads bowed to one another, as if in confrontation on an important issue.<sup>15</sup> The right-hand figure seems to represent a bearded military commander, with a white diadem or *stephane* on

---

VIII. *Actes du VIII<sup>ème</sup> Colloque International pour l'étude de la mosaïque antique et médiévale, 6-10 octobre 1997*, 2 vols. (Cahiers d'archéologie romande de la Bibliothèque historique vaudoise, vols. 85-86), Lausanne 2001, vol. II, pp. 302-315.

9 A. OVADIAH, *Art and Archaeology in Israel and Neighbouring Countries: Antiquity and Late Antiquity*, London 2002, pp. 94, 103, Figs. 13-20.

10 *The New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land*, ed. by E. STERN, 4 vols. Jerusalem 1993, vol. III, p. 1076.

11 See E. L. SUKENIK, בית-הכנסת של דורא-אברופוס וציוריו [The Synagogue of Dura-Europos and its Frescoes], Jerusalem 1947, Figs. 15, 17-18, 29, Pls. 4, 10-11; *Excavations at Dura-Europos. Final Report*, 8 vols. (14 pts.), New Haven 1943-1969, vol. VIII/1: C. H. KRAELING, *The Synagogue* (1956), Pls. XVI, XIX, XXIV, LI-LIII.

12 See also the partial iconographic description by K. BRITT, “B. The Mosaic Panels,” in: *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 27 (2014), pp. 348-355, here pp. 354-355.

13 See A. OVADIAH, *Geometric and Floral Patterns in Ancient Mosaics. A Study of their Origin in the Mosaics from the Classical Period to the Age of Augustus*, Roma 1980, pp. 23, 109-110.

14 See OVADIAH, *Geometric and Floral Patterns* (note 13), pp. 23, 116-117.

15 See the interesting descriptions and analysis of the 1<sup>st</sup>-century CE Roman rhetor and writer Quintilian (*Institutio Oratoria* [The Orator's Education], 11.3.65-136 (translated by D. A. Russell, vol. V [Loeb Classical Library, vol. 494], Cambridge, MA / London 2001) on the gestures of the body, head, hands and feet, as well as the facial expression, although the mosaic panel under discussion is dated to the mid-5<sup>th</sup>-century CE.

his head, tied behind with two black fillets and wearing an ornate battle dress and a reddish-brown (purple?) *chlamys* / cloak, fastened with a *fibula* on his right shoulder. He is also wearing what seems to be a cuirass, covering his tunic. His attire, cuirass, diadem or *stephane* and his firm frontal stance seem to indicate a high military rank, possibly that of a high royal commander. His face expresses a certain calmness. In his left hand he holds the left horn of a large bull, while looking at a bearded elderly man (the other large figure) opposite him and pointing to the animal with all the digits of his right hand. A row of seven helmeted warriors, armed with spears and round shields, features above and behind him. Two disproportional, stylized and schematic brown battle elephants,<sup>16</sup> smaller in size in comparison to the human figures, are depicted in profile, standing on a horizontal ground-line. The animals are wearing decorated collars or harnesses and each has two overlapping round shields on either side, tied with two ropes in a *chi*-shape, to protect their bodies. The back part of the lower elephant's body is cut off by the decorative frame. The bearded elderly figure, opposite the commander, displays a serious and tense posture, with a severe and aggressive facial expression. He wears a long-sleeved short white tunic and mantle adorned with the Greek letter H.<sup>17</sup> The index finger of his right hand is raised upward, pointing to heaven, and he holds an unidentified object (a dagger?) in his left hand, close to the body of the military commander. He is accompanied by seven (?) beardless young warriors with varied and

---

16 On the elephant in the Greek and Roman world, see H. H. SCULLARD, *The Elephant in the Greek and Roman World* (Aspects of Greek and Roman Life), London 1974, esp. pp. 185-190.

17 The Greek letter H appears, either as a weavers' sign or as a decorative status symbol, in the attire of various figures of the Roman and early Byzantine periods; see, for example, Roman coffins from Egypt – Y. YADIN, *הממצאים מימי ברר*, כוכבא במערת האיגרות [The Finds from the Bar-Kokhba Period in the "Cave of Letters"], Jerusalem 1963, p. 235, Fig. 77 (f); wall mosaics of Christian monuments – O. GRABAR, *Byzantium. From the Death of Theodosius to the Rise of Islam*, London 1966, pp. 126-127 (Ills. 135-136), and G. BOVINI, *Ravenna: Art and History*, Ravenna 1979, p. 50 (Ravenna – Mausoleum of Galla Placidia) and pp. 77-78 (Ravenna – Arian Baptistery); GRABAR, *Byzantium* (note 17), p. 136 (Ill. 146), p. 138 (Ill. 149) (Rome – Santi Cosma e Damiano). It is also found among Jews, as for example in the attire of several figures in the wall paintings of the synagogue at Dura Europos (3<sup>rd</sup>-century CE) (Yadin, *הממצאים* [note 17], p. 235, Fig. 77 [b-c]) and on vestiges of clothing in the "Cave of Letters", in the Judean desert, from the Bar-Kokhba period (2<sup>nd</sup>-century CE) (YADIN, *הממצאים* [note 17], pp. 230-232, Fig. 76 [No. 27], Pls. 69, 85).

rich hairstyles, wearing long-sleeved short white tunics whose lower left edge is also embellished with the Greek letter H, and short red boots adorned with black stripes. They are holding fully or partially sheathed swords in their left or right hands, except for one who holds a long sword upright in his right hand. All of them are looking at the elderly man, except the one on the right side of the second (upper) level, who is looking outwards. Two of the armed figures are pointing with their right index finger threateningly towards the royal commander.<sup>18</sup> The artist has emphasized the large, wide-open eyes of the figures depicted on the left side of the register, as well those of the elderly man and the military commander, all of whom thus express a certain spiritual (πνευματικόν) and transcendental gaze.<sup>19</sup>

Although the artist has depicted surfaces of light and shade in the tunics of the warriors and the elderly man, standing on the left side of the register, the rendering of the folds is rather flat and stylized, lacking the three-dimensional effect of the clothing. The heads and bodies of the elderly man and the warriors are inclined forward and presented in three-quarter view, with rather spread feet, as if marching towards the centre on a hilly area. The discussed panel is not crowded with images and empty space is discernible, especially in the foreground. The composition is horizontal, seemingly with three levels, one above or behind the other on the right side, and two on the left side. The levels on the right side feature the lower elephant, the bull and the second elephant, and a row of seven armed warriors, while those on the left side consist of two rows of seven (?) warriors. This would seem to be an attempt by the artist to express a certain perspective of the composition. The contrasting representation of the two military groups is clearly discernible: the dynamic and belligerent appearance of the Jewish warriors on the left side and the static appearance of the Seleucid soldiers on the right side.

The middle register consists of a symmetrical, rhythmic arcade, rather monumental, formed by nine round arches, perhaps in front of nine niches. An elderly bearded figure, seated on an ornate, high-backed throne in the central arch, divides the arcade into two groups of four beardless armed

---

18 See MAGNESS ET AL., “Huqoq – 2014, Preliminary Report” (note 2); WILLIAMS, “Explore This Mysterious Mosaic” (note 1).

19 On the spiritual-transcendental gaze, see H. P. L'ORANGE, *Art Forms and Civic Life in the Late Roman Empire*, Princeton, NJ 1965, pp. 111, 123-124; H. P. L'ORANGE, *Apotheosis in Ancient Portraiture*, New Rochelle, NY 1982, pp. 98-110, 116-117.



youths on each side. One can clearly observe the stone masonry, the monolithic columns with the double square bases and the square impost capitals, typical of the architecture of the early Byzantine period.<sup>20</sup> The beardless youths are standing frontally, each in an arch, with their heads turned, except for the second figure from the left, towards the enthroned elderly man in the central arch, which is wider than the others. The figures are depicted as if exalted and glorious personages. Each youth has large, wide-open eyes, expressing a spiritual-transcendental gaze, like those of the figures depicted in the top register,<sup>21</sup> as well as varied and rich hairstyles. They wear “long-sleeved white tunics, lavishly decorated with purple trim at neck, wrists and hemline, fall below the knees; *segmenta* are seen on the right shoulders and *orbiculi* at the knees”.<sup>22</sup> White mantles, draped over their left arms, are embellished with the Greek letter H. Four of the youths, fully or partially preserved, hold the hilt of their sheathed sword with their right hand while grasping the top of the scabbard in their left. They stand on a wavy ground-line and their short boots are identical to those of the figures in the top register. The enthroned elderly figure possibly holds a scroll in his two hands, while his feet are resting on a footstool. He wears a “long white tunic, embellished with two black *clavi*, while two horizontal bands adorn the bottom of his right sleeve; the other sleeve is obscured by the mantle draped over his lap”.<sup>23</sup> Interestingly and exceptionally, his attire is ornamented twice near the edges with the Greek letter H. His boots are similar to those worn by the royal commander in the top register. His body is depicted frontally, while his head is rendered in slightly three-quarter view. The artist has paid attention to his hairstyle<sup>24</sup> and large, wide-open eyes, expressing the above-mentioned spiritual and transcendental gaze, as if looking directly at the beholder and engaging in dialogue with him. The youths, their heads turned towards the elderly man, express a close relation-

---

20 On impost capitals in early Byzantine architecture, see F. X. BARTL and J. BOEHRRINGER, *Ravenna. San Vitale, Sant'Apollinare in Classe*, Baden-Baden 1959, Ills. 2-3, 5-12; GRABAR, *Byzantium* (note 17), p. 17 (Ill. 14), p. 23 (Ill. 21), p. 24 (Ill. 22), p. 75 (Ills. 77-78), p. 93 (Ill. 99); BOVINI, *Ravenna* (note 17), pp. 16, 21.

21 See above, note 19.

22 BRITT, “B. The Mosaic Panels” (note 12), pp. 354-355.

23 BRITT, “B. The Mosaic Panels” (note 12), p. 355.

24 On a similar hairstyle of a 5<sup>th</sup>-century CE male portrait head, the so-called head of Eutropius, from Ephesos, cf. J. INAN and E. ROSENBAUM, *Roman and Early Byzantine Portrait Sculpture in Asia Minor*, London 1970, pp. 151-153 (No. 194), Pl. CLXXXI (1-2).

ship to him. Above every figure, at the top of each arch, a lighted oil lamp was originally represented, but only six are now preserved out of the nine. The rhythmic composition of this register is expressed by the round elements (the arches) and vertical lines (the columns and the bodies of the figures).

Only half of the bottom register has been preserved, with the following representations from left to right: a fallen, bleeding warrior, bent forward, helmeted with an oval shield and a long sheathed sword, pierced by a spear; a slain, bleeding battle elephant lying on the ground; a dead, bleeding soldier, fallen backwards above the slain elephant, shown with his helmet and the oval shield in his right hand, while his left hand is raised, pierced by two spears; and a slain or wounded bleeding bull, pierced by three spears. The right lower side of the register is mostly destroyed, but from what remains the tumult of battle is clearly discernible, characterized by a *horror vacui*.

### *Interpretation*

The content and meaning of the representations in the three registers under discussion are enigmatic. However, a priori it can be said that the depictions were adopted from 1 and 2 Maccabees<sup>25</sup> and other historical sources. The middle register forms a thematic link between the top and bottom registers and might offer the key to solving the meaning of this mosaic panel.

The warlike scenes represented in the top and bottom registers suggest certain fateful events of historical significance for the Jewish people. The characteristics of the warriors and their royal commander, together with the Asiatic battle elephants, suggest a Greek-Seleucid army confronting the Maccabees, during the revolt that occurred under the reigns of Antiochos IV Epiphanes (175-164 BCE) and Antiochos V Eupator (164-161 BCE).

The literary/historical sources, 1 Maccabees and Josephus Flavius' *Jewish Antiquities* and *The Jewish War*,<sup>26</sup> mention the powerful military force of the Seleucid army and the elephants that accompanied the troops, and describe in detail the events of the revolt. 1 Maccabees points out:

---

25 These books are not included in the Old Testament and are considered apocryphal in Judaism, while according to the Catholic perception they are an integral part of the Canon of the Holy Scriptures.

26 See 1 Macc; Josephus, *Antiquitates* XII.248 ff. (for an English translation of the respective paragraphs, see: JOSEPHUS, *Jewish Antiquities*, translated by R. Marcus, vol. IV [Loeb Classical Library, vol. 365], Cambridge, MA / London 1998); JOSEPHUS, *de Bello Judaico* I.31-47 (for an English translation of the respective paragraphs, see: JOSEPHUS, *The Jewish War*, translated by H. St. J. Thackeray, vol. II [Loeb Classical Library, vol. 203], Cambridge, MA / London 1976).



καὶ ἦν ὁ ἀριθμὸς τῶν δυνάμεων αὐτοῦ ἑκατὸν χιλιάδες πεζῶν καὶ εἴκοσι χιλιάδες ἵππεων καὶ ἐλέφαντες δύο καὶ τριάκοντα εἰδότες πόλεμον. καὶ ἦλθον διὰ τῆς Ἰδουμαίας καὶ παρενέβαλον ἐπὶ Βαιθσουραν καὶ ἐπολέμησαν ἡμέρας πολλὰς καὶ ἐποίησαν μηχανάς· καὶ ἐξῆλθον καὶ ἐνεπύρισαν αὐτὰς πυρὶ καὶ ἐπολέμησαν ἀνδρωδῶς (And the number of his forces was a hundred thousand footmen, and twenty thousand horsemen, and two and thirty elephants trained for war. And they went through Idumaea, and encamped against Bethsura, and fought against it many days, and made engines of war; and they of Bethsura came out, and burned them with fire, and fought valiantly).<sup>27</sup>

Josephus Flavius, probably following 1 Maccabees, narrates:

καὶ συνήχθη στρατὸς πεζῶν μὲν ὥσει δέκα μυριάδες, ἵππεῖς δὲ δισμύριοι, ἐλέφαντες δὲ δύο καὶ τριάκοντα (And so an army was collected, which consisted of about a hundred thousand foot-soldiers and twenty thousand horsemen and thirty-two elephants).<sup>28</sup>

These literary / historical sources also describe the arrival of King Antiochos IV Epiphanes' officers in Modi'in, most probably in 167 BCE, with orders by the king to compel the Jews to sacrifice to other gods.

1 Maccabees notes the following:

And the king's officers, that were enforcing the apostasy, came into the city Modin (Modi'in – authors) to sacrifice. And many of Israel came unto them, and Mattathias and his sons were gathered together. And the king's officers answered and spake to Mattathias, saying, 'Thou art a ruler and an honourable and great man in this city, and strengthened with sons and brethren: now therefore come thou first and do the commandment of the king, as all the nations have done, and the men of Judah, and they that remain in Jerusalem: and thou and thy house shall be in the number of the king's friends, and thou and thy sons shall be honoured with silver and gold and many gifts'. And Mattathias answered and said with a loud voice, 'If all the nations that are in the house of the king's dominion hearken unto him, to fall away each one from the worship of his fathers, and have made choice to follow his commandments, yet will I

---

27 See 1 Macc 6:30-31 (this event is related to the reign of Antiochos V Eupator and the command of Lysias, more precisely to the year 163 BCE); for the English translation, see *The Apocrypha*, introduction D. DANIELL, London 2006 (2<sup>nd</sup> printing 2007), p. 284.

28 Josephus, *Antiquitates* XII.366, 371 (this event is related to the reign of Antiochos V Eupator and the command of Lysias, more precisely to the year 163 BCE). Josephus in his earlier work (*de Bello Judaico* I.41) gives a different account regarding the number of the forces and the elephants: "The latter (Antiochos V Eupator – authors), accordingly, having collected 50,000 infantry, some 5,000 horses and 80 elephants, pushed through Judaea into the hill country".

and my sons and my brethren walk in the covenant of our fathers. Heaven forbid that we should forsake the law and the ordinances. We will not hearken to the king's words, to go aside from our worship, on the right hand, or on the left'. And the king's officer (man – authors) (καὶ τὸν ἄνδρα τοῦ βασιλέως), who compelled men to sacrifice, he killed at the time, and pulled down the altar. And he was zealous for the law, even as Phinehas did unto Zimri the son of Salu. And Mattathias cried out in the city with a loud voice, saying, 'Whosoever is zealous for the law, and maintaineth the covenant, let him come forth after me.' And he and his sons fled into the mountains, and forsook all that they had in the city.<sup>29</sup>

Josephus' description is slightly different:

But there came to the village of Modai (Modi'in – authors) the officers appointed by the king to compel the Jews to carry out his ordinances, and they ordered the inhabitants to sacrifice as the king had ordered; and as Mattathias was held in esteem because of various things and especially because of his goodly sons, they invited him to be the first to sacrifice – for, they said his fellow-citizens would follow him, and for that reason he would be honoured by the king –, but Mattathias refused to do so, saying that even if all the other nations obeyed the command of Antiochos whether through fear or through desire to please he himself and his sons would never be persuaded to abandon their native form of worship. But when he had ceased speaking, one of the Jews came forward and in their midst sacrificed as Antiochos had commanded, whereupon Mattathias in rage rushed upon him with his sons, who had broad knives, and cut down the man himself, and also made an end of Apelles, the king's officer, who was compelling them to sacrifice, together with a few of his soldiers; and after pulling down the pagan altar, he cried out,<sup>30</sup> 'Whoever is zealous for our country's laws and the worship of God, let him come with me!'. So saying, he set out with his sons into the wilderness, leaving behind all his property in the village.<sup>31</sup>

The descriptions of the literary / historical sources of the encounter of the royal commander, on behalf of Antiochos IV Epiphanes, with Mattathias

---

29 See 1 Macc 2:15-28 (for the English translation, see *The Apocrypha* [note 27], pp. 270-271).

30 Josephus, *Antiquitates* XII.270: καὶ αὐτόν τε ἐκεῖνον διέφθειρεν καὶ τὸν στρατηγὸν τοῦ βασιλέως Ἀπελλῆν, ὃς ἐπὶ νάγκαζεν, διεχρήσατο μετ' ὀλίγων στρατιωτῶν, καὶ τὸν βωμὸν καθελὼν ἀνέκραγεν. It should be noted that the general's name – Apelles – is not mentioned in 1 Macc (2:25), which calls him simply "the king's man" (τὸν ἄνδρα τοῦ βασιλέως), nor is the killing of the soldiers mentioned.

31 See Josephus, *Antiquitates* XII.268-271.

the Hasmonean, the priest,<sup>32</sup> in Modin (Modi'in – authors) and of the Seleucid forces, including the battle elephants, surprisingly correspond to the visual depictions in the top register of the mosaic panel. It can be observed how the Seleucid commander points at the bull<sup>33</sup> with all the digits of his right hand, as if saying: "Look at the bull, the king orders to sacrifice it on the altar!" As against, the upraised right hand of the elderly man, identified as Mattathias, pointing with his index finger to heaven, expresses his explicit and forceful refusal to submit to idolatry (*'Avodah Zarah*) and mirrors his resistance to the king's command: namely, to submit to the royal decree and to the king's commander to sacrifice the animal (i.e. the bull), shown in the register. In addition, it also expresses an oath,<sup>34</sup> that is, his loyalty to the laws and commandments of his forefathers and the worship of the God (of Israel). Following Mattathias' confrontation with the royal commander, the latter was killed by Mattathias, as narrated in the literary / historical sources. It should be noted that the fingers of the left hand of Mattathias are clasped, possibly holding the dagger (?) with which he killed the Seleucid military commander, perhaps even during the confrontation. The seven armed warriors, above and behind the Seleucid commander, might be accompanying the royal commander to the meeting with Mattathias the Hasmonean in Modi'in. Alternatively, they might represent the Seleucid army (somewhat like a *phalanx*?) with the battle elephants, brought to Judaea. It appears that these depictions present synchronically two different events, which occurred at different periods of time: that is, the first in the reign of Antiochos IV Epiphanes (ca. 167 BCE); and the second in the reign of Antiochos V Eupator (ca. 163 BCE).

According to 1 Maccabees, El'azar, the fourth son of Mattathias, was crushed by an elephant and fell heroically in the battle of Bet Zechariah

---

32 He belonged to the priestly course of Joiarib (יהויריב), a family from Jerusalem and the first of the twenty-four priestly courses (משמרת ראשונה) that served in the Temple before its destruction in 70 CE; see M. AVI-YONAH, "A List of Priestly Courses from Caesarea," in: *Israel Exploration Journal* 12 (1962), pp. 137-139.

33 The kind of animal for sacrifice, as the king had ordered, is not noted in 1 Macc (2:15, 23). The anonymous artist of the mosaic panel probably carried out the work according to the instructions of the leaders of the community, and hence he illustrated a bull, as this animal is acceptable in the Jewish religious/dietary law.

34 In the Bible, the raised hand signifies an oath, as in the case of Avram (i.e. Abraham) and the king of Sedom in Gen 14:22: "And Avram said to the king of Sedom, I have raised my hand to the Lord, the most high God, the Possessor of heaven and earth". We are grateful to Prof. Yehuda Friedlander, Bar Ilan University, who kindly drew our attention to this verse.

(Judea) in 162 BCE: “And El‘azar, who was called Avaran, saw one of the beast armed with royal breastplate, and he was higher than all the beasts, and the king seemed to be upon him; and he gave himself to deliver his people, and to get him an everlasting name; and he ran upon him courageously into the midst of the phalanx, and slew on the right hand and on the left, and they parted asunder from him on this side and on that. And he crept under the elephant, and thrust him from beneath, and slew him; and the elephant fell to the earth upon him, and he died there. And they saw the strength of the kingdom, and the fierce onset of the hosts, and turned away from them”.<sup>35</sup>

This event is also reported by Josephus Flavius:

And his brother El‘azar, whom they called Auran, on seeing that the tallest of the elephants was armed with breastplates like those of the king, and supposing that the king was mounted on it, risked his life by rushing upon it boldly, and after killing many of the men round the elephant and scattering the others, he slipped under the elephant’s belly and killed it with a thrust. But the animal came down upon El‘azar and crushed the hero under its weight. And so, after bravely destroying many of the foe, El‘azar met his end in this manner.<sup>36</sup>

The same event is also narrated by Josephus in *The Jewish War*:

[...], El‘azar, brother of Judas, observing the tallest of the elephants, surmounted by a huge howdah and an array of gilded battlements, and concluding that it bore Antiochos, rushed out far beyond his own lines and, cutting through the enemy’s ranks, made his way to the elephant. Being unable to reach the supposed monarch because of his height from the ground, he struck the beast below the belly, brought its whole weight down upon himself, and was crushed to death; having achieved nothing more than to attempt great things, holding life cheaper than renown. The elephant-rider was, in fact, a commoner; yet, even had he happened to be Antiochos, his daring assailant would have gained but the reputation of courting death in the bare expectation of a brilliant exploit.<sup>37</sup>

Following these historical descriptions, the bottom register may be depicting the episode of the heroic death of El‘azar on the battlefield of Bet Zechariah (162 BCE). The dead warrior, shown above the slain elephant, seems to be the elephant-rider and not the Seleucid child-king Antiochos V Eupator. In addition, the fallen warrior, depicted on the left side of the

---

35 See 1 Macc 6:43-47 (for the English translation, see *The Apocrypha* [note 27], pp. 284-285).

36 See Josephus, *Antiquitates* XII.373-374.

37 See Josephus, *de Bello Judaico* I.42-44.

register, might be one of the Seleucid soldiers killed by El'azar around the huge elephant, as Josephus says, before he himself was crushed to death under the weight of the slain beast.

Presumably, the figurative arcade, in the middle register, is thematically connected to the other registers. It is reminiscent of a unique figurative architectural candelabrum (the *hanukkiab*), connected with *Hanukkah* (the Feast of the Dedication), beginning on the twenty-fifth of Kislev (the ninth month of the Jewish calendar).<sup>38</sup> Thus, the nine human figures, with a lighted oil lamp above each one, appear to be both an allegory and a personification of the *hanukkiab*. The enthroned elderly man in the central arch, with the two H adorning his attire, signifies the *shamash* (the central, distinct branch), while the eight armed youths in the other arches, adorned with only one H, signify the eight equal branches.

The story of *Hanukkah* is connected with the purification (καθαρισμός) and rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem,<sup>39</sup> the lighting of the *menorah*, the erection of a new altar in place of the polluted one and the production of new holy vessels ([...] καὶ ἐποίησαν σκεύη ἅγια καινὰ καὶ εἰσήνεγκαν τὴν λυχνίαν καὶ τὸ θυσιαστήριον τῶν θυμιαμάτων καὶ τὴν τράπεζαν εἰς τὸν ναόν. καὶ ἐθυμίασαν ἐπὶ τὸ θυσιαστήριον καὶ ἐξῆψαν τοὺς λύχνους τοὺς ἐπὶ τῆς λυχνίας, καὶ ἔφαινον ἐν τῷ ναῷ).<sup>40</sup>

1 Maccabees mentions an eight-day celebration (καὶ ἐποίησαν τὸν ἐγκαινισμὸν τοῦ θυσιαστηρίου ἡμέρας ὀκτὼ [...])<sup>41</sup> of sacrifice (θυσίαν)<sup>42</sup> and songs (ὠδαῖς) with the use of various musical instruments: harps (κιθάραις), lutes (κινύραις) and cymbals (κυμβάλοις),<sup>43</sup> proclaimed upon rededication of the Temple and altar, though the name of the festival and the miracle of the single can of oil that lasted eight days and the lights are not mentioned. Furthermore, it is stated that the victorious Judas Maccabeus and his brothers and the whole congregation of Israel ordained an annual eight-

---

38 See below, note 56.

39 See 1 Macc 4:36-59 (esp. 36): ἀναβῶμεν καθαρίσαι τὰ ἅγια καὶ ἐγκαινίσαι (let us go up to cleanse the holy place, and to dedicate it afresh). For the English translation, see *The Apocrypha* (note 27), p. 277.

40 See 1 Macc 4:49-50; cf. also 2 Macc 10:3: καὶ τὸν νεὼ καθάρισαντες ἕτερον θυσιαστήριον ἐποίησαν καὶ πυρώσαντες λίθους καὶ πῦρ ἐκ τούτων λαβόντες ἀνήνεγκαν θυσίας μετὰ διετὴ χρόνον καὶ θυμίαμα καὶ λύχνους καὶ τῶν ἄρτων τὴν πρόθεσιν ἐποίησαντο.

41 See 1 Macc 4:56, 59.

42 See 1 Macc 4:53.

43 See 1 Macc 4:54.



day celebration, from the twenty-fifth of the month of Kislev.<sup>44</sup> Josephus Flavius, probably following 1 Maccabees, narrates almost the same story,<sup>45</sup> but he too neither refers to the miracle of the can of oil nor calls the festival *Hanukkah*, but rather the “festival of Lights” (τὴν ἑορτὴν ἄγομεν καλοῦντες αὐτὴν φῶτα).<sup>46</sup> However, the festival of *Hanukkah* is alluded to in several tractates in the Mishnah<sup>47</sup> and in the Babylonian Talmud.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, the miracle of the one-day supply of oil, lasting for an amazing eight days, is described in the Talmud.<sup>49</sup>

The miracle of the sealed can of oil, found in the Temple during its purification and rededication, and the festival of *Hanukkah* are also dealt with in *Megillat (Scroll of) Antiochos*, ascribed either earlier than the Books of Maccabees or later (2<sup>nd</sup>-century CE).<sup>50</sup> The *Megillah* concludes with the following words:

After this, the sons of Israel went up to the Temple and rebuilt its gates and purified the Temple from the dead bodies and from the defilement. And they sought after pure olive oil to light the lamps therewith, but could not find any, except one bowl that was sealed with the signet ring of the High Priest from the days of Samuel the Prophet and they knew that it was pure. There was in it [enough oil] to light [the lamps therewith] for one day, but the God of heaven whose name dwells there put therein his blessing and they were able to light from it eight days. Therefore, the sons of Hashmonai made this covenant and took upon themselves a solemn vow, they and the sons of Israel, all of them, to publish amongst the sons of Israel, [to the end] that they might observe these eight days of joy and honour, as the days of the feasts written in [the book of] the Law, [even] to light in them so as to make known to those who come after

---

44 See 1 Macc 4:59.

45 See Josephus, *Antiquitates* XII.316-325.

46 See Josephus, *Antiquitates* XII.325.

47 See mBQ VI:6; mBikk I:6; mMeg III:4,6; mMQ III:9; mRSh I:3; mTaan II:10.

48 See bSuk 46a (referring to the blessings for the *Hanukkah* lights); bShab 21a-b focuses on Shabbat candles and moves to *Hanukkah* candles.

49 See bShab 21b (stating that after the forces of Antiochos IV Epiphanes had been driven from the Temple, the Maccabees discovered that almost all of the ritual oil had been profaned. They found only a single can that was still sealed by the High Priest, with enough oil to keep the *menorah* in the temple lit for a single day. They used this and miraculously it burned for eight days).

50 See B.-Z. LURIE (ed.), לאור משנה קדומה, פרשיות בתולדות בית חשמונאי, מגילת תענית: פרשיות בתולדות בית חשמונאי, *[Megillat Ta'anit]*, Jerusalem 1996, pp. 56-60. The Scroll is also known as מגילת חנוכה *Megillat Benei Hashmonai* (*Scroll of the Sons of Hasmoneans*), מגילת חנוכה *Megillat (Scroll of) Hanukkah*, and מגילת יונית *Megillat Yevanit* (*Greek Scroll*).



them that their God wrought for them salvation from heaven. In them, it is not permitted to mourn, neither to decree a fast [on those days], and anyone who has a vow to perform, let him perform it.<sup>51</sup>

Another literary source, *Megillat (Scroll of) Ta'anit*, dated to the end of the Second Temple period (66 CE?), also refers to these events.<sup>52</sup>

### *Conclusions*

Following the above-mentioned literary/historical sources, it seems that the chronological range of the events, depicted in the top and bottom registers of the mosaic panel, lies between 167 and 162 BCE.<sup>53</sup>

167 BCE – the king ordered that an altar to Zeus be erected in the Temple and that pigs be sacrificed on it, as well as banning circumcision;<sup>54</sup> in the same year, the encounter between the king's commander with Mattathias the Hasmonean took place in Modin (Modi'in); following the refusal of Mattathias in this encounter to obey the king's command to sacrifice to other gods, and the killing of the king's commander and some of his soldiers, the Maccabean revolt broke out (top register).<sup>55</sup>

164 BCE – after successful victories of the Maccabees over the Seleucid forces and the death of Antiochos IV Epiphanes, the Temple was liberated, purified and rededicated (on the twenty-fifth of the month of Kislev).<sup>56</sup> Following these, the festival of *Hanukkah* was instituted to celebrate the events by lighting the nine-branched *hanukkiyah* (middle register).

162 BCE – the slaying of the elephant in the battle at Bet Zechariah by El'azar the Hasmonean, and his heroic death (bottom register).<sup>57</sup>

It thus seems that in this mosaic panel the artist chose to depict synchronically, as noted above, two different events in the top register, as recounted in 1 Maccabees and Josephus' *Jewish Antiquities* (XII). The artist does not appear

---

51 LURIE (ed.), מגילת תענית (note 50), p. 60 (for the English translation, see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/megillat\\_Antiochus](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/megillat_Antiochus)); for other versions, see also: LURIE (ed.), מגילת תענית (note 50), pp. 68-69.

52 LURIE (ed.), מגילת תענית (note 50), pp. 170-180.

53 The Temple in Jerusalem was looted and services stopped by order of Antiochos IV Epiphanes in 168 BCE.

54 See Josephus, *de Bello Judaico* I.34.

55 See above, notes 29-31.

56 See 1 Macc 4:52 (καὶ ὥρθρισαν τὸ πρῶτὶ τῇ πέμπτῃ καὶ εἰκάδι τοῦ μηνὸς τοῦ ἐνάτου [οὗτος ὁ μὴν Χασελευ]); 4:59 (ἀπὸ τῆς πέμπτης καὶ εἰκάδος τοῦ μηνὸς Χασελευ); 2 Macc 1:18 (ἐν τῷ Χασελευ πέμπτῃ καὶ εἰκάδι).

57 See above, notes 35-37.

to have distinguished between the two events which occurred three-four years apart, and instead combined both of them in one and the same iconographic context. However, the refusal of Mattathias the priest, and the consequent outbreak of the Maccabean revolt against the Seleucid rule, is clearly rendered visually in the discussed top register, expressing the Hasmoneans' ambition and desire for religious freedom and political independence. Following the victories of the Maccabees, the liberation, purification and rededication of the Temple, *Hanukkah* (the Feast of the Dedication) was celebrated, represented by the figurative *hanukkiyah* in the middle register.

The depictions in these three registers thus appear to present real episodes that are noted in the above-mentioned literary / historical sources. They were translated here into a visual language for the benefit of the synagogue congregant, who could observe and learn from the past history of the Jewish world. It is plausible that the intention of the leaders of the Huqoq community was to express visually the symbolic / allegorical and didactic aspects of the representations, both recalling and perpetuating the past of the Jewish world and emphasizing the Jewish identity. The commemoration of the Maccabean revolt, more than six hundred years after it had broken out, and its allegorical visualization in the mosaic floor of the mid-5<sup>th</sup> century CE synagogue at Huqoq, demonstrate the Jewish collective memory in Late Antiquity. Moreover, the portrayed victory of the Maccabees over the Seleucids and the achievement of religious freedom and political independence, seem also to signify the victory of Judaism over those that sought to oppress it.

The discussed mosaic panel and the other biblical scenes in the synagogue seem to have played an important role in the daily life of the Jewish community at Huqoq, providing support and encouragement and raising Messianic hopes and expectations for a better future than the religious-political atmosphere and unstable situation that had prevailed in the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE. Furthermore, while *Hanukkah* commemorates the victory of the Maccabees over the Seleucids and the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem, the *hanukkiyah* and its lights, representing the miracle of the can of oil, might symbolize, together with its didactic aspects, the victory of the spirit and light over evil and darkness.