

Rare biblical mosaics uncovered in ancient Galilee synagogue

by [Michele Chabin](#) in the [August 31, 2016](#) issue

Unusual mosaics depicting biblical scenes—one of Noah’s ark, the other of the parting of the Red Sea—were uncovered this summer by archaeologists excavating a fifth-century synagogue at Huqoq, an ancient Jewish village near the Sea of Galilee.

A consortium of universities, led by Jodi Magness of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, uncovered the mosaics during its fifth annual excavation in June.

Magness said the mosaics, like others discovered at the synagogue since 2012, are of “extremely high artistic quality.”

The Noah’s ark mosaic includes pairs of bears, donkeys, leopards, camels, lions, ostriches, and snakes, just as described in the book of Genesis.

The mosaic of the parting of the Red Sea features pharaoh’s soldiers drowning with their horses and chariots.

“Of course the story of Noah’s ark and the parting of the Red Sea were known to Jews, as well as Christians, at the time because they read the Hebrew Bible,” Magness said. “We have other ancient synagogues where these scenes are depicted, though they are not common in synagogue art.”

The archaeologist said excavation experts dug down to a level of soil where, based on findings elsewhere at the site, they hoped mosaics might be found.

“As our site conservator, Orna Cohen, worked methodically to brush away the dirt, little by little, we all stood around and began to see animals. At some point we realized this was a depiction of Noah’s ark.”

Deciphering the second mosaic was harder, Magness said.

“We could see little bits and pieces of people, fish, chariots,” she said. “We all stood around and guessed” whether the mosaic depicted a biblical story and if so, which one.

It is the parting of the Red Sea, but with a twist on the biblical story: a large fish is swallowing pharaoh's soldiers.

"This represents an elaboration on the story that must have been circulating at the time," she said.

The mosaics have been removed from the site for conservation and study.

A previously discovered mosaic from the site that depicts Samson carrying the gate of Gaza on his shoulders (Judges 16:3) is on display at Kibbutz Ginosar, on the shores of the Sea of Galilee.

Magness would love to see the mosaics eventually restored to the Huqoq synagogue, and there are conversations at high levels about that possibility, she said.

"It would require an enormous investment of money to develop the site, a building with a guard and cooperation between different government authorities that would have to take responsibility. Who owns the land? Who would maintain it?"

Nathan Elkins, assistant professor of art history at Baylor University, another one of the participating schools, served as coin specialist at the excavation site, according to a university statement.

"The ancient coins at Huqoq," he said, "span 2,300 years at the site and are critical for our knowledge of the monumental synagogue and the associated village."
—Religion News Service; added source

This article was edited on August 18, 2016.