Mosaics and Warriors:

War and Redemption in Late Antique Palestinian Synagogues

It is widely believed that following the failure of the Bar Kokhba revolt, the Jews became hesitant to engage in wars and use weapons. They preferred to wait for the Lord himself to take vengeance on their enemies and redeem the People of Israel. What was not permitted in reality, however, could be imagined and displayed in stories and images. In this lecture I will focus on imagery of Jewish warriors in Late Antique Galilean synagogue mosaics. The desire to research this topic stemmed first and foremost from the recent discovery of a mosaic tile floor which is still being uncovered in the Huqoq Synagogue. I will begin by discussing a number of scenes from this mosaic. In the second part of my lecture I will explore the possibility that the mosaics do not reflect only a historic awareness, but also a sincere resolve to influence historical events by taking up arms.

The ancient synagogue at Huqoq is located about eight kilometers west of Capernaum. The site has been continuously settled since Biblical times. Two sages who originated from and lived in Huqoq are known from the Talmudic Period. The presence of a synagogue in the village is mentioned by Rabbi Ishtori Haparchi in his book “Button and Flower” which was written at the beginning of the fourteenth century. He writes: “We saw a synagogue there with an old floor.” The synagogue is mentioned again later by researchers and travelers, though it had never been properly excavated. The excavation of the site began in 2011 and is conducted jointly by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill’s Prof. Jodi Magness, and the Israeli Antiquities Authority’s Shua Kisilevitz. Although the excavations are still underway, the importance of the finds led to a decision by the National Parks Authority to establish a park at the site upon completion of the excavations. Since the excavations of the mosaic tile floor, not to mention the entire synagogue complex, have not been completed, one should regard my ideas below as suggestions. There is no question, however, about the synagogue’s unique features. The excavators dated the synagogue and mosaic floor to the fifth century.

The most significant discovery so far is a mosaic scene which is almost completely preserved, depicting an encounter between an apparently Jewish group and a non-Jewish group. The scene is composed of three registers. The upper register, which takes up about half of the mosaic floor, depicts two groups. The members of the first group are wearing white clothes and holding swords and scrolls and the members of the second group are warriors with elephants. Each of the groups has a prominent bearded figure, apparently the group’s leader. The middle register depicts nine figures wearing white clothes, which are likely the same people depicted in the upper register. They are sitting inside nine arcades. The middle arcade is larger and depicts the bearded leader. In the lower register one can see the battle elephants and the ox lying dead with arrows stuck in them, surrounded by the weapons of the people from the upper register.

Jodi Magness, the site’s excavator, suggested in a National Geographic article that this is the first depiction of the encounter between Alexander the Great and the High Priest. Despite the evident violent features, Magness claimed that the mosaic floor does not contain a clear war scene. More importantly, according to Magness’ interpretation, Alexander the Great is holding the ox, which he intends to sacrifice to God. Indeed, the High Priest is pointing upwards. Her research associates, Ra'anan Boustan and Karen Brit, suggested that the scene is depicting the sacrifice offered by Antiochus VII (Sidetes) in Jerusalem in 132 BCE. They also focused their attention on the ox which was being led to sacrifice, according to their interpretation. Despite the strong and understandable yearning for peace, I think that it is impossible to disregard the clear warlike contexts, and especially the image of the broken vessels on the bottom of the mosaic floor. More specifically, we must reject the suggestion regarding Alexander the Great, since in the hundreds or thousands of visual images of Alexander the Great from antiquity he is always clean shaven. This is true also of Antiochus VII.

Asher Ovadiah recently suggested that the mosaic floor depicts the tale of the holiday of Hanukkah. He identified the group on the right with the Greeks led by Antiochus, while the Jewish group was led by Matityahu. He proposed that Antiochus – or his representative – is coercing Matityahu to sacrifice an ox as part of idol worship, though Matityahu is refusing and pointing upward. Though I agree with this in principle, it is difficult to accept this interpretation in light of the fact that the common practice among the Greeks was the sacrifice of pigs. More importantly, the first book of Maccabees - which according to Asher Ovadiah provided the foundation for the story depicted on the mosaic floor - clearly mentions that the Greeks sacrificed “pigs and impure beasts.” Despite this reservation I agree with Ovadiah that this is indeed the first visual depiction of the Maccabees’ battles.

Identifying the group on the right with the Greeks seems evident in light of their weapons and elephants. Although the scene does not depict a true battle, I think it hints at an ideological confrontation between Judaism and Hellenism. A well-known midrash from the fourth or fifth century blames the Greeks for harsh laws: “they would say that the Jews should write on the horn of an ox (alluding to the making of the golden calf) that they have no part in the God of Israel.” One should pay attention to the fact that the Greek figure is holding the ox by its horn! The Talmudic legend does not elaborate about the Jews’ reaction, though the mosaic shows that their reaction was to point their finger upward, no doubt towards the Lord of Israel. One should note that, while the Greek warriors are equipped with the best armory, the Jewish warriors are equipped with swords and scrolls, which symbolize the Bible. Is it possible to identify the figures more precisely than just being symbolic depictions of the Greeks and the Jews? It seems to me that Asher Ovadiah is correct when identifying the Greek figure with Antiochus Epiphanes. Although the Hellenistic kings were usually clean shaven, representations of Antiochus Epiphanes on coins depict him with a beard. It is possible that this is not a personal preference. It is well known that the Greek god Zeus had an impressive beard. It is possible that the artist made use of the image of the bearded Antiochus in order to highlight the religious aspects of the conflict. On one side Antiochus is acting in the name of Zeus, while on the other side the Jew is pointing upwards. Concerning the Jewish figure, I must confess that I do not have a good suggestion. I think that the attempt by Ovadiah to identify him as Matityahu the Hasmonean, and Boustan and Brit’s attempt to identify him as John Hyrcanus I, are not well founded. It seems to me that all we can say is that this figure represents a Jewish leader. We should note two additional details concerning this register. The Greek camp is characterized by order and discipline. The Greek warriors are situated one after another. The javelins are pointed upward and the elephants are situated beneath them in a similar orderly fashion. In the Jewish camp, on the other hand, there is anarchy. Some of the swords are drawn while others are still in their sheaths; the warriors are facing different directions. Some are pointing with their fingers while others are not. The warrior in the upper right who is holding a scroll and looking back towards the rest of the warriors is most remarkable. There is no need to elaborate regarding the disorder in the Jewish army. This is probably based on an authentic familiarity with the Jewish character, as can be attested by all the soldiers in the modern Jewish army! Regarding the scroll and its prominent presence, I believe that this is another example of the spiritual battle between Greece and Judah. As opposed to the demand to “write on an ox horn”, the Jews write Torah scrolls!

In light of the above interpretation, the meaning of the two lower registers should be self-evident. The middle register depicts the Jewish leader within an arcade, with eight warriors seated beside him, four on each side. In this image everyone is holding scrolls instead of swords. There is an oil lamp above each of the soldiers, together creating a Hanukkiah, which has eight candles with a Shamash in the middle. The lower register clearly depicts the Greeks’ demise. The ox, elephants and weapons lay lifeless.

While a depiction of the Hanukkah tale in a synagogue should not surprise us, none have been previously found. In the dozens of mosaic tile floors found so far, the scenes were taken exclusively from the Bible. This is the first known occurrence of a post-Biblical scene. One cannot claim that the people who requested the mosaic floor sought only to add variety to their usual scenes. Not limiting themselves to the accepted narrative pool may imply that this particular scene was very significant for the Huqoq community.

The Huqoq excavations uncovered several additional Biblical scenes. Since the excavations are not complete, it is impossible to offer a final interpretation of these scenes’ composition. It is important, however, to mention two additional scenes which were found. The first is the parting of the Red Sea which emphasizes the destruction of Pharaoh’s army. An additional scene depicts Samson holding the gates of Gaza. Taken together with the scene discussed above, these scenes constitute an assemblage of events in which the Jews are victorious over the gentiles with God’s assistance. Is it possible to speak of a Jewish community with military inclinations which existed at Huqoq during the fifth century? Before I answer, it is worth taking a look at two other communities in the area.

About 15 kilometers north of Huqoq is Khirbet Meroth. This site has a synagogue dating to the fourth century with a mosaic tile floor depicting King David after he took Goliath’s weapons. Uzi Liebner excavated a synagogue at Khirbet Wadi Hamam, situated about 10 kilometers south of Huqoq. This synagogue has a mosaic tile floor dated to the fourth century with two well-known scenes. The first depicts Pharaoh’s army drowning in the sea, and the other depicts Samson striking the Philistines. It is possible that there was an additional scene in which Goliath was lying on the ground.

Thus, three adjacent synagogues, dating to the fourth-fifth centuries, have been discovered so far in the Eastern Galilee, all containing battle scenes depicting the victory of the Jews over the gentiles. It seems to me that these depictions did not only evoke the past, but rather expressed real aspirations. Refuge caves were found beneath the Meroth and Huqoq synagogues, similar to the ones used during the Bar-Kokhba revolt. It is yet unclear whether these cave systems, especially the one in Huqoq, were hollowed out during the Great Revolt or the Bar-Kokhba revolt, or perhaps even later. In any case it is clear that the builders of the synagogues during the fourth-fifth centuries knew of these systems and installed an entrance to them from within the synagogues. Were the members of the community preparing for a new revolt against the Roman Empire? The disturbances which erupted across Jewish communities in the year 351, known as the “Jewish Revolt against Constantius Gallus”, were the closest the Jews came to an actual revolt during those periods. We must confess, however, that little is known about these events and the military initiative taken up by the Jews. Another possibility lies in the eschatological geography of the region. As early as the fourth century the Jerusalem Talmud tells us of Rabbi Hiyya the Great and Rabbi Simeon Ben Halafta who were walking in the Arbel Valley and saw the first light at daybreak. Rabbi Hiyya the Great said: “[Like the break of day] so is thus the redemption of Israel. It begins little by little and, as it proceeds, it grows greater and greater.” The Arbel Valley is situated directly above the Wadi Hamam Synagogue and is in the same geographic region as Huqoq and Meroth. In an apocalyptic composition named the Book of Zerubbabel, the Arbel Valley is considered to have a significant part in the redemption plan. The book, which was probably composed during times of confrontation with Byzantium, Persia and the Muslim world in the early seventh century, implies that the Messiah will reveal himself in the Arbel Valley. Although this apocalyptic book was composed in a later period, it may teach of the Messianic mindset which was prominent in the Galilee during earlier periods.

The synagogue-goers of Huqoq, Wadi Hamam and Meroth may have been inspired by the ancient Jewish warriors and hoped that the final redemption would begin nearby. It seems that these aspirations were translated into actions. Between the past and the future the Jews hollowed out or cleaned out the refuge cave systems and prepared for the next war.