

Introduction to a range of interpretations of the Elephant mosaic panel at Huqoq

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The so-called “Elephant Mosaic” is a small (119.5 x 111.7 cm) panel located in the E aisle of the 5th-c. synagogue being excavated at Huqoq (Israel). It formed only one element of the overall mosaic decoration of a synagogue; numerous further scenes have been and continue to be discovered, only a few of which have yet been published.¹ Any attempt to assess the overall significance of the decoration or the relationship between the various scenes depicted must therefore await the completion of the excavations and their publication. But the Elephant panel already stands out as an anomaly; all the other narrative scenes known so far can be readily recognised as portraying a clearly identifiable story from the Hebrew Bible, as is normal in synagogue mosaics. This panel, however, is so far from being clearly recognisable that at least 6 major, different interpretations have been proposed to date, only one of them Biblical. In their Preface to the official publication by K. Britt and R. Boustán,² the editors (J. H. Humphrey, K. Bolonnikova) listed the interpretation first put forward by the director of the excavation, J. Magness, that the scene portrayed depicts the legendary meeting of Alexander the Great and the Jewish High Priest; and that advanced by several Russian scholars, and apparently entertained by some members of the excavation team, that it shows episodes from the Maccabean Revolt against Antiochus IV, perhaps combined in some way with the story of the Maccabean martyrs. Britt and Roustán themselves surveyed (and rejected) both of these proposals, as well as the possibility that it shows an unidentified (and unidentifiable) Biblical scene, possibly related to Abraham, before setting out the interpretation that they espouse, that the scenes relate to the siege of Jerusalem by Antiochus VII, along with that king’s encounter and alliance with the Hasmonean leader John Hyrcanus.

The two book reviews and two articles that follow here add three further proposals for an interpretation, while producing cogent criticisms of the previous interpretations. In the first official review of Britt and Boustán, Janine Balty, after some useful methodological reflections, returns to the Maccabean revolt against Antiochus IV and the celebration of the ensuing victory; she stresses that the composition is symbolic rather than strictly narrative, and sees the most important point as lying in the reference to the feast of Hanukkah. In the second review to have been written of Britt and Boustán, R. Talgam has another suggestion: the panel refers to the confrontation between Ptolemy IV Philopator and the High Priest Simon, and the failure of the subsequent attempt to have the Jews trampled to death by elephants in the hippodrome at Alexandria. In the first article which follows the two book reviews, B. Gordon and Z. Weiss, noting that all other narrative scenes both in this synagogue (as known so far) and in others of this period are derived from the Bible, propose that it portrays the meeting of Samuel and Saul at Gilgal (I Sam. 15). For A. Erlich, in the second article, the top scene shows the (legendary) meeting between Rabbi Judah the Patriarch and the emperor Caracalla, who presents the Rabbi with a bull to improve the breeding stock of Judean cattle.

Readers will make their own judgements about the respective strengths of the varied contributions. However, it seems clear that no further progress is possible with the attempt to interpret the mosaic as an ‘illustration’ of a specific episode of Jewish history or legend on the basis of its degree of correspondence to the written sources for that episode. The lack of such correspondence is a frequent charge made in the criticisms by the various authors of their predecessors; but in setting out their own interpretations most of them have to rely at some point

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- 1 J. Magness *et al.*, “Huqoq (Lower Galilee) and its synagogue mosaics: preliminary report on the excavations of 2011-13,” *JRA* 27 (2014) 327-55. For brief reports of later finds, with links to annual reports in *Hadashot Arkheologiyot*, see <http://www.huqoq.org>; other reports can be found online at www.biblicalarchaeology.org.
 - 2 K. Britt and R. Boustán, *The Elephant mosaic panel in the synagogue at Huqoq: official publication and initial interpretations* (JRA Suppl. 106, 2017).

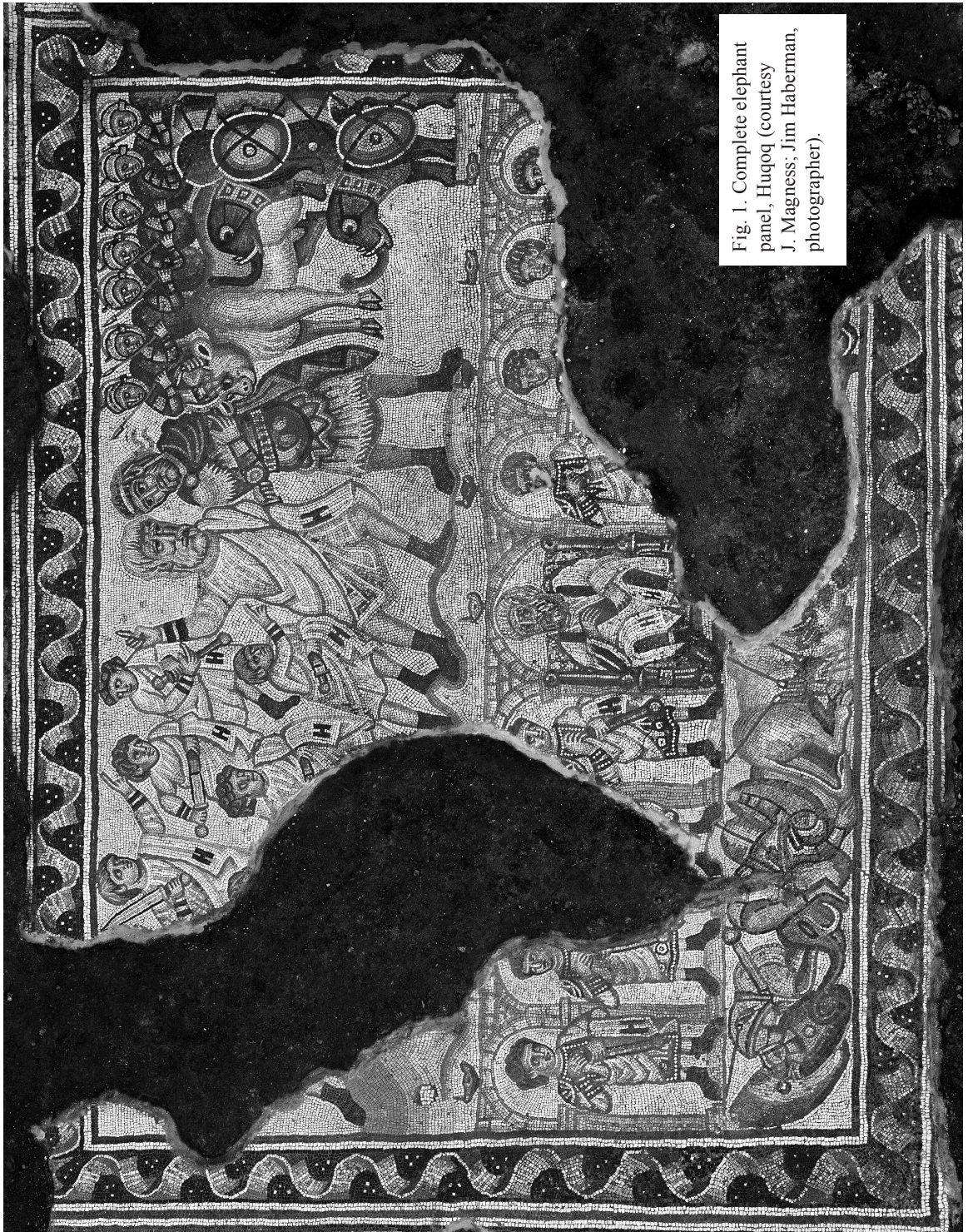


Fig. 1. Complete elephant panel, Huqoq (courtesy J. Magness; Jim Haberman, photographer).

on hypothetical suggestions such as 'the artist may have had these stories in mind', or 'perhaps the artist intended ...'.

The relationship that is assumed here between the image and an underlying text, however, needs to be looked at more closely. Many recent discussions have stressed that ancient artists did not normally set out to give literal illustrations of written texts, even very well known ones,

and the same is likely to hold for Jewish art, especially if dealing with non-Biblical subjects. Moreover, it should not be assumed that we know all versions of a given legend that may have circulated in late antiquity: there were undoubtedly oral traditions that are lost to us. But we can be confident that the artist would have aimed to compose a scene whose main message would be understood by its viewers in the village of Huqoq, without their needing to be familiar with all the details of a particular story.

The mosaic therefore raises the question how we might go about the exegesis and understanding of an image where our normal criteria — comparison with parallels, the presence of clear identifiers, correspondence to a familiar story — prove ineffective. An alternative approach would start with what is actually shown on the mosaic, and try to decipher how it might have been read by contemporary viewers with the aid of the visual codes that were familiar to them. The artist was not interested in anecdotal details, but in conveying a message clearly. To this end, he made use of compositional devices that are common in late-antique art, and which would have helped to guide his viewers. If he chose to include certain details, this must have been because he believed that they would help to make his point. Thus, if the defeated enemies in the lowest register include dead soldiers similar to those shown in the royal army at the top, a dead elephant,³ and a dead bull, the most natural way for viewers to read this would be to see them as the same figures as those shown in the top register, but now slain. Similarly, the young men in the middle register would naturally be taken to be the same as those at the top, but their dress differs in a significant way: in the top scene they wear plain tunics (apart from bands at the wrist), but the tunics of the lower ones are richly decorated with purplish *orbiculi* and *segmenta*, suggesting ceremonial costume.⁴ And given the frequency with which arcades are used as a framing device in late-antique art, in all sorts of media, the arcade in the middle register is likely to have been seen by its viewers primarily as serving to enhance the honorific presentation of the figures framed in it, the young warriors as well as the old priest at the centre. It may also imply a reference to a specific building of significance to the overall theme, but the interpretation should recognise its rôle as an honorific device and not start from the search for a particular building. The relationship of the bottom register to that above it also echoes a familiar compositional device of ancient — and especially late-antique — art: the victors stand above the dead bodies of their foes, symbolically trampling them under foot.

There will continue to be disagreements amongst modern viewers about the way to read the 'Elephant panel' and the exact nature of the message that is being conveyed in it. Questions remain about the actions of the figures in the top register — a *rapprochement* between the two leaders, or a hostile encounter? Are the young men more likely to be shown as sheathing their swords, or as drawing them? And what, if anything, is held in the left hand of the old leader, and what message did it convey to the viewers?⁵ The depiction of the 9 lamps along the top of the arcade must be intended to convey a point of some significance, but the question of their possible relationship to Hanukkah is likely to be a matter of debate between experts on the history of the Jewish festivals. It is important that the mosaic itself should not get lost in such discussions, submerged by the search for a suitable incident in Jewish history or legend. The community that saw the mosaic in the synagogue must have drawn from it a message that they understood, one that is likely to have dealt with their God's power to save his people from threats by foreign rulers, as well as with the heroism of those people themselves; that message was not dependent on whether or not they could name the protagonists correctly.

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3 The fragment further to the right above the border appears to show the tusk of a second elephant, echoing therefore the pair that appear at the top.

4 The tunic of the old man in the central register is also much richer than that which he wears at the top, with full sleeves and conspicuous *clavi*.

5 In addition to the alternatives of a coin or a sword hilt raised by Britt and Boustán, A. Erlich (below) suggests "a small pile of something", perhaps soil or earth, evidently held in the palm of the hand and not between the fingers. The fact that this is the old man's left hand may argue against the theory of Britt and Boustán that he is handing a coin to the king; such a gesture might be expected to be made with the right hand.