

An illustration of the third book of Maccabees in a late-antique Galilean synagogue?

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KAREN BRITT and RA'ANAN BOUSTAN, *THE ELEPHANT MOSAIC PANEL IN THE SYNAGOGUE AT HUQOQ: FIRST PUBLICATION AND INITIAL INTERPRETATIONS* (Journal of Roman Archaeology Supplementary Series no. 106; Portsmouth, RI 2017). Pp. 82, 21 figs. including 4 in colour. ISBN 978-0-9994586-0-0. \$49.75.

A principle at stake

The publication of preliminary reports prior to the conclusion of an excavation project is considered an obligation upon archaeologists. The rôle of preliminary reports in professional journals is to share the material uncovered with the scientific community, promote academic discourse, and allow other researchers to reference new discoveries. Disclosing new discoveries in the popular media is done to promote interest in archaeology among the general public; further, it can help with the raising of funds for the completion of a project. Visits by other professionals to an ongoing excavation are commonplace. Such was the policy of the excavators at Huqoq. Towards the end of each season, scholars working on related topics were invited for a guided tour of the site. Nothing was hidden, and the project's director, J. Magness, responded to questions. Other mosaic specialists were granted permission to enter the trenches and converse with the project's own specialists. The excavator's decision to start to publish the elephant mosaic panel even before it was fully uncovered¹ was equally intended to allow others to join the discussion.

Until recently, an archaeologist who shared his or her discoveries with colleagues had to be concerned only with the possibility that his or her current understanding of the material uncovered was partial and in need of further work. The ethical norm held that, even after a preliminary publication, the excavator maintained exclusive rights to further publication. Other scholars acted with restraint and recognized the need to obtain permission in order to use plans and photographs in their own publications. The few who did not adhere to this norm were met with harsh criticism. Unfortunately, with the digital age, the norms have changed and violations of intellectual property are common. The Magdala stone, which describes the Temple and its sacred utensils, was first published in academic journals by scholars who were entirely uninvolved with its excavation and did not receive permission.²

In this context, the strong stance taken by the editor of *JRA* is most commendable and the cooperation lent by the director of the *Liber Annuus* is noteworthy. The decision by the editor of *JRA* to share the background story with *JRA*'s readers was intended to clarify and help reinstate professional ethics. We should indeed hope that this step will discourage further unauthorized publications. Nonetheless, the question remains about pre-existing unauthorized publications: should they be ignored, or should they be treated like other legitimate publications? The approach by the editor of *JRA* is that those publications should be considered and their academic content mentioned. While this is an admirable stance, it does not help the task of curbing the phenomenon of unauthorized publications.

In this changed climate, in which archaeologists lack confidence that their colleagues will respect intellectual property rights, the excavators at Huqoq are currently exercising care in

1 *JRA* 27 (2014) 354-55 (K. Britt) with colour pls. 18-22.

2 M. Aviam, "The decorated stone from the synagogue at Migdal: a holistic interpretation and glimpse into the life of Galilean Jews at the time of Jesus," *Novum Testamentum* 55 (2013) 205-20; R. Bauckhom, "Further thoughts on the Migdal synagogue stone," *Novum Testamentum* 57 (2015) 113-35; D. B. Binder, "The mystery of Magdala stone," in D. A. Warner (ed.), *A city set on the hill: essays in honor of James F. Strange* (Mountain Home, AR 2014) 17-48. In the interests of full disclosure, the present reviewer is the one authorized by the excavators to publish the stone.

revealing the contents of the several mosaic panels excavated thus far. Although this limits discussion of the elephant panel, their actions are understandable. I will therefore observe the same constraints by not discussing the other panels, and will simply consider the general characteristics of the mosaics of this synagogue in order to place the elephant panel in its artistic and historical context.

Developments in Jewish and Christian art in late antiquity

As is illustrated by the discoveries at Dura Europos and in the catacombs of Rome, from the 3rd c. onwards Jews and Christians began to depict scriptural stories on the walls of their gathering places and in their funerary art. The rise of a new religion of the Book, the appropriation of the sacred Jewish text by Christians and its interpretation in very different ways, not to mention the prestige and centrality of Homer in Greek education,³ form the historical background against which frescoes were first painted on the walls of Jewish and Christian edifices. Such frescoes served as visual aids for instruction in the Holy Scriptures, conveying which texts were forbidden and which accepted, and drawing adherents to the respective communities.

A vital change in Jewish art occurred at the beginning of the 4th c. Broad iconographic schemes like those found on the walls of the 3rd-c. Dura synagogue were transferred to the floor.⁴ This change is apparent in both the recently discovered synagogues overlooking the Sea of Galilee, at Wadi Hamam⁵ and at Huqoq. The mosaics that adorned these synagogues seem to have included a series of pictorial panels depicting Biblical themes. The Biblical scenes highlight the fact that these synagogues were repositories of Jewish sacred texts. They aided the Jews in defining themselves in relation to other groups and their Scriptures.

From the 4th to the 7th c., floor mosaics became the standard medium for decorating synagogues because treading on them ensured that they would not become objects of worship. By contrast, the floors of churches were generally considered an inappropriate place for depicting human figures from the Scriptures: Biblical themes therefore appear mainly on walls. The Biblical stories depicted on walls or floors were selected from a large pool. A comparison of the Biblical stories and characters that appear on the walls of the Dura synagogue with those on the floors at Huqoq and Wadi Hamam reveals several important aspects. For example, the figure of Moses that appears in several panels at Dura is absent from scenes where he is to be expected; this can be explained both by differences in Jewish art of the Diaspora, as well as by a wish to de-emphasize the significance of Moses, as seen in his omission from the Passover Haggadah.

A comparison of the stories depicted in synagogues to those appearing in churches, as well as differences in the iconography of identical stories between these two contexts, reveals the degree of familiarity between, and the proximity of, these two types of communities. The depiction of certain Biblical scenes can further be explained against the background of a polemic against paganism. Significant deviations from the Biblical text reflect oral traditions that were written down only much later. Over time, the depiction of Biblical scenes in synagogue mosaics shifted from quasi-emblematic panels portraying dozens of scenes to floors incorporating just a few Biblical descriptions. This development is evident when one compares the arrays of mosaics at Wadi Hamam, Huqoq and Meroth to the mosaics from sites such as Sepphoris and Beit Alpha.⁶

3 M. Finkelberg, "Homer as a foundation text," in id. and G. G. Stroumsa (edd.), *Homer, the Bible, and beyond: literary and religious canons in the ancient world* (Leiden 2003) 75-96.

4 R. Talgam, "From wall paintings to floor mosaics: Jewish and Christian attitudes to figurative art," in U. Leibner and C. Hezser (edd.), *Jewish art in its late antique context* (Tübingen 2016) 97-118.

5 U. Leibner, "Excavations at Khirbet Wadi Hamam (Lower Galilee): the synagogue and the settlement," with an appendix by Leibner and S. Miller on "A figural mosaic," *JRA* 23 (2010) 220-64.

6 The number of Galilean synagogues adorned with mosaic floors is in fact larger than that noted by the Huqoq excavators (p. 23). Evidence of mosaics was discovered at: Horvat Natur, Meroth, H. Kefar Shammai (Kh. Sammu'iya), Kfar Hanania, at two synagogues in Sepphoris, Horvat Amudim, Horvat Kur and Hammath Tiberias. See Z. Ilan, "A survey of ancient synagogues in

The mosaics of Huqoq and the question of their dating

A full understanding of a mosaic pavement requires setting the visual images in a precise historical context. In the publication under review, this has not been done, due to the reasons and concerns mentioned: the excavation is still under way, and study of the stratigraphy, pottery and coins has not yet been completed. The question of the date is the central one for the project director. Many of her publications have focused on dating Galilean synagogues: based on an analysis of the stratigraphy and ceramics, she has refuted the conclusions of the original excavators and proposed a chronology that attributes these synagogues to the end of the 5th and the 6th c.⁷ The excavation at Huqoq was designed to permit her to test this chronology through an excavation of her own. Magness holds the view that the findings date the synagogue mosaic to the second half of the 4th or beginning of the 5th c. When completed, a full analysis of the technical, stylistic and compositional aspects of the mosaic and a comparison with other mosaics in E Mediterranean lands has the potential to corroborate or modify Magness's ideas about the dating.

The mosaic floor at Huqoq is similar in composition, technique and style to that at Wadi Hamam. The final report by the excavators, now in press, argues for a date around A.D. 300 for the phase containing the mosaic. There was an earlier synagogue on the site which is dated to the early 3rd c. The extensive excavations of the surroundings indicate that most of the village was abandoned by the mid-4th c. and village life, including that of the synagogue, had ended completely by the end of the 4th c. The Wadi Hamam mosaic is thus dated almost a century earlier than the Huqoq mosaic. In light of this difference, the analysis of compositional and stylistic features becomes especially important. Will further analysis of the Huqoq mosaic place it within the timeframe proposed by Magness, or will it suggest a date closer to that assigned to the Wadi Hamam mosaic? The excavation team at Huqoq has not concealed their differing identifications of the figures depicted in the elephant panel, and we may assume that they will behave transparently if discrepancies arise between a dating based on stratigraphic, ceramic and numismatic analyses, on one hand, and one based on the technical and stylistic criteria of the mosaic, on the other.

A precise dating within the later 4th or early 5th c., if coinformed, has implications for the significance of the elephant panel: could it refer, for example, to the attempts by Julian the Apostate to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem,⁸ to the confiscation of the synagogue at Antioch

Galilee," *Eretz Israel* 19 (1987) 169-98 [Hebrew].

7 J. Magness, "Synagogue typology and earthquake chronology at Khirbet Shema, Israel," *JFA* 24.2 (1997) 211-20; "When were the Galilean-type synagogues built," *Cathedra* 101 (2001) 39-70 [Hebrew]; "The question of the synagogue: the problem of typology," in A. Avery-Peck and J. Neusner (edd.), *Judaism in Late Antiquity*, Part 3, vol. 4. *Where we stand: issues and debates in ancient Judaism: the special problem of the synagogue* (Leiden 2001) 1-48; "A response to Eric M. Meyers and James F. Strange," *ibid.* 79-91; "Synagogues in ancient Palestine: problems of typology and chronology," in L. I. Levine (ed.), *Continuity and renewal; Jews and Judaism in Byzantine-Christian Palestine* (Jerusalem 2004) 507-25.

8 In keeping with his efforts to revive traditional Roman religious rituals against the spread of Christianity, Julian, the last pagan emperor, ordered the Temple rebuilt in 363, but failed. His desire to rebuild it was intended to remove the conceptual basis of Christian claims that the destruction of the Temple (prophesied in Matthew 24:1-2) is an eternal proof of Christianity's victory over Judaism. Julian attributed great significance to the offering of animal sacrifices. He opposed the Christian doctrine that, since Jesus sacrificed himself, there is no need for blood sacrifices such as those offered in the Temple. Modern historians know little about the Jews' reaction to the emperor's plan except from what is reported in pagan and hostile Christian sources. My own suggested interpretation of the elephant panel (see below) may involve a hint at this episode. A more precise dating of the floor could help endorse or refute this speculation. Another panel in the synagogue at Huqoq, yet to be published, may similarly evoke this historical event. On Julian's attempt to rebuild the Temple, see M. Avi Yonah, *The Jews of Palestine* (Oxford 1962) 193-201; S. P. Brock, "A letter attributed to Cyril of Jerusalem on the rebuilding of the Temple," *BullSOAS* 40 (1977) 267-86;

named for Hannah and her 7 sons and its replacement by a church,⁹ or to the anti-Jewish preachings of John Chrysostom? For to understand the elephant panel, we need to inquire into Jewish-Christian polemics of the 3rd and 4th c. — their dimensions, the realms in which they took place, and the extent to which they affected the Jewish communities in the Galilee. Were they conducted by an elect few and confined to written texts, or did they involve broader sectors of society? To what degree was each side familiar with the arguments propounded by the other(s)? Nor can we ignore testimony regarding contacts and disputes between Jews and Gentiles in Antioch in particular and in the cities of Syria in general. Although echoes of Jewish-Christian polemics at Antioch can be found in 2nd- and 3rd-c. Antiochean Christian sources, the tension apparently increased during the second half of the 4th c.¹⁰ After the death of Julian, the Roman authorities appropriated the Hasmonean martyrs' synagogue and turned it into a church. Two decades later, John Chrysostom delivered a series of sermons against the Jews, asserting that their refusal to accept Jesus as the Messiah led to the end of their rôle in sacred history, while the destruction of their city and Temple constituted a public declaration of their rejection by God. In his sermons, John Chrysostom emphasized the attraction synagogues exerted over Christians. He also stressed that the Jews regarded the synagogue as a holy site, and considered themselves the successors to the Biblical figures and, above all, the owners of the holy scrolls.

The elephant panel

The elephant panel is doubtless the most intriguing and the most challenging of the mosaics discovered in the synagogue. Although it has survived nearly intact, its subject matter is difficult to interpret. Thus far, it is the only panel in the mosaic floor that is divided into several registers and depicts several scenes. The figures are unlabelled and the depicted scenes have no parallels. Scholars are divided: should the mosaic be read from bottom to top, from top to bottom, or simultaneously? And what type of pictorial narrative is used? Is it a continuous narrative of two successive episodes in a story that has repeat characters, or is it rather a progressive narrative in which there is no replication of images? Thus far, at least, there is consensus that the mosaic panel is the first non-Biblical story ever found in an ancient synagogue.

The panel is divided into three registers. In the upper one, the chief protagonists are a Hellenistic king, who wears a diadem and leads a bull, and an old man in a white robe, who points skywards. Each protagonist has an entourage: behind the king, a phalanx of soldiers and battle elephants; behind the old man, 8 youths dressed in white tunics who are pulling their swords. The middle register depicts an arcade of 9 arches with an oil lamp above each. Inside the central arch a white-haired man sits on a throne. The four arches to either side frame young men wearing ornamented robes. In the more fragmentary lower register we see a fallen elephant, collapsed soldiers who seem similar to those appearing behind the king in the upper register, and a wounded bull.

The elephants in the upper register helped the artist make clear the identity of the armed soldiers in its right-hand half. War elephants were used by the Ptolemies and Seleucids. The Seleucids gained control of Indian war elephants, while the Ptolemies managed to capture and train the smaller African 'forest' elephants which carried a single mahout equipped with javelins, as is seen in the lower register here. The Romans rarely used war elephants in battle: they were more likely to use them in the arena or in official ceremonies. The depiction here of war elephants enabled the late-antique viewers clearly to identify the scene as a confrontation with the Seleucids or Ptolemies.

K. Britt and R. Boustán examine various proposed interpretations, pointing out the weaknesses, and eventually present their own. Some proposed interpretations are outlined in the

G. W. Bowersock, *Julian the Apostate* (Cambridge, MA 1978) 88-90 and 120-22.

⁹ See below n.26.

¹⁰ On the Jewish-Christian polemics in this period, see W. A. Meeks and R. L. Wilken, *Jews and Christians in Antioch in the first four centuries of the common era* (Missoula, MT 1978) 19-52; R. Wilken, *John Chrysostom and the Jews: rhetoric and reality in the late fourth century* (Berkeley, CA 1983).

editorial preface, while some are included in the monograph itself. I tend to agree with the authors' reservations about other proposals (see further below).

N. Braginskaya's interpretation

The first scholar to discuss the panel in print was N. Braginskaya¹¹ who proposed that the panel depicts episodes from the period of the Maccabean Revolt against the Seleucid kingdom under Antiochus IV Epiphanes. According to her earlier interpretation, the youths in the top register represent members of the Maccabean family preparing to enter battle against the Seleucids, who are depicted as a Macedonian-style phalanx with elephants. As Britt and Boustan remark, the presence of a bull — which is not a military animal — weakens this assumption. Later, Braginskaya modified her interpretation of the upper register, suggesting that it represents Mattathias' refusal to offer sacrifice to the pagan gods (1 Macc. 2: 17-22). This proposal does not explain the presence in the scene of the king; furthermore, it is likely that the old man recognized by Braginskaya as Eleazar would be accompanied by his 5 Maccabean sons, rather than by 8 young men. Braginskaya holds that the middle register depicts Eleazar, the 7 Maccabean martyrs, and their mother. The difficulty with this interpretation is that we see 8 young men, not 7, and no woman is present. Her proposal does not explain the peculiar representation of Maccabean martyrs inside the arcade or the throne on which Eleazar sits. As we can see from Christian depictions of the Maccabean martyrs, a death of those who are prepared to die rather succumb to idolatry would choose to emphasize the heroism and suffering that accompanied martyrdom. In Braginskaya's view, the 9 lamps set over the arches in the middle register would be related to the practice of kindling Hanukkah lights to memorialize the rededication of the Jerusalem Temple. The lower register, according to her, would depict Judah Maccabeus's victories over the pagan population of the Galilee and Gilead. Braginskaya does not explain, however, why this panel is narrower, and why it does not depict Maccabees, but rather soldiers similar to those appearing in the upper register.

J. Magness's interpretation

The interpretation preferred by project director Magness is that the panel depicts the legendary story of Alexander the Great's visit to Jerusalem and his meeting with the high priest of the Jewish god, identified as Jaddua (Iaddus) by Josephus and as Simeon the Righteous in most Rabbinic sources. This meeting is also reported in Greek in Ps.-Callisthenes' *Alexander Romance* and in the Christian chronographic tradition. Such a reading disregards the two lower registers. Furthermore, the anti-Samaritan element of the story, especially prominent in the Rabbinic sources, is not represented. In the earlier Rabbinic text, the event took place in 21 Kislev and is referred to as the 'Day of Mt. Gerizim'; it is claimed that on that day Alexander delivered the Samaritans and their temple into the hands of the Jews.

Britt and Boustan's interpretation

The interpretation favored by Britt and Boustan in their coherent and erudite study of both textual and visual sources (a collaboration that implicitly acknowledges the limits of the expertise and professional skill of each) is that the panel depicts the bloody siege of Jerusalem by Antiochus VII Sidetes in 132 B.C. and the subsequent peace and military treaty between the Seleucid king and John Hyrcanus, high priest and ruler of Judea. The panel would thus represent a narrative tradition about the later generations of Hasmonean rulers.

Britt and Boustan argue that the panel should be read from the bottom to top. The bottom and middle registers are two halves of a single scene: the figures in the bottom register represent the Seleucid soldiers, while the 8 youths within the arcade are the Judean defenders of Jerusalem with their leader, John Hyrcanus. The moment depicted in the top register would be the peace agreement achieved between the Jewish high priest and the Seleucid king. The two leaders exchange gifts. Antiochus VII reveals his piety by offering a bull for sacrifice to the Jewish god. In return, John Hyrcanus pays the ransom required by Antiochus.

11 References to her works in Russian are provided by K. Bolonnikova within the editorial preface (pp. 11-15) to the volume by Britt and Boustan.

I have several difficulties with this interpretation. First, Britt and Boustan admit that the youths within the arcade are not dressed for the battlefield and their swords are sheathed. The account of the siege of Jerusalem by Antiochus VII is preserved in Josephus and a short version appears in Plutarch's *Regum et imperatorum apophthegmata*, but doubts exist concerning the circulation of these texts amongst Jews in late antiquity. As V. Noam has shown, Rabbinic literature never relied on the writings of Josephus: in every case where similarities exist between the texts, their source is to be found within a compilation of ancient Jewish traditions known to both.¹² The writings of Josephus were preserved due to their transmission by Christians. I doubt whether the story discussed by Britt and Boustan was known in late antiquity. In any event, in light of the antagonism between John Hyrcanus and the Pharisees, it is unlikely that this particular story, rather than one of the many others concerning the Hasmoneans, would have been chosen for illustration. Many of the panels in this synagogue testify to the power of the Jewish God. Therefore it is difficult to explain why the creator of the mosaic should have chosen to depict a change in relations with a Hellenistic ruler brought about by a payment of gold extracted from David's tomb, rather than through divine intervention.

To the discussion of Britt and Boustan concerning the garments worn by the Jews in the elephant panel, I would add some observations made by Y. Yadin. In his excavations in the Cave of the Letters, Yadin found mantles with ornamental patterns belonging to Jews from the time of the Bar Kokhba Revolt.¹³ One of the most dominant patterns consisted of notched bands. The notched bands on the mantles are all of the same shape, resembling an elongated Greek eta, but their width varies. Almost all the mantles with notched bands are dyed in a lighter color, white or yellow. Yadin also noticed that in the Dura paintings notched bands appear only on men's mantles, below which are visible tunics with two *clavi*. In the elephant panel the Jewish men wear white tunics with *clavi* and white mantles with eta-shaped patterns, similar to those on Yadin's textiles and in the Dura paintings. Another pattern appearing on some mantles in the Cave of the Letters is the gamma (a right angle with notched ends)¹⁴ but those particular mantles are colourful. At Dura these appear only on women. In Christian art of late antiquity figures wearing mantles with gammas occasionally appear. As Yadin wrote:¹⁵

An interesting development of the notched bands and the gammas is to be seen in many of the Early Christian mosaics in Rome, Ravenna and Naples, especially those from the fifth century AD and later. Almost all the mantles of biblical figures are depicted with a single gamma, and only very occasionally with the notched bands. It seems that already at the time of the execution of these mosaics the meaning of these patterns was lost.

On the white garments Yadin referred to what is stated in Sifrey, Deuteronomy 115 b:¹⁶

That a woman shall not wear white garments, and that a man shall not cover himself with colored garments.

The artists at Huqoq seem to have been well aware of the original significance of the white garments and notched bands, and explicitly added them to the mantles of the male Jewish figures.

A new theory: Ptolemy IV Philopator and the High Priests Simon and Eleazar, as told in "III Maccabees"

I therefore propose a different identification of the registers. In my view, they fit the book known as "III Maccabees". This book, which is mainly a work of historical fiction, is included in the Septuagint and was not part of the Jewish Hebrew Bible. The work was translated into Armenian and Syriac.¹⁷ Neither the Church Fathers nor their Byzantine successors composed exegetical works based on III Maccabees; its existence is mentioned briefly in Eusebius' *Chroni-*

12 V. Noam, "Did the Rabbis know Josephus' works?" *Tarbiz* 81 (2013) 367-95 [Hebrew].

13 Y. Yadin, *The finds from the Bar Kokhba period in the Cave of Letters* (Jerusalem 1963) 219-31.

14 The eta and gamma bands should not be confused with weavers' marks, which are much smaller.

15 *Ibid.* 230.

16 *Ibid.* 229.

17 The last chapter of the *Constitutiones apostolicae* (VIII, 47-85) mentions three Books of the Maccabees. A version of "III Maccabees" exists in the *Pesitta*: F. Parente, "The Third Book of Maccabees as ideological document and historical source," *Henoah* 10.2 (1988) 144.

con, and it appears in abridged form in the *Commentary on Daniel* by Theodoretus of Cyrrhus (or Antioch).¹⁸ In spite of its name, “III Maccabees” does not tell of the Hasmoneans and Seleucids. Its original title is unknown, but scholars agree that it constitutes part of the Diaspora literature of late Second Temple Period.¹⁹ It reports two clashes between Ptolemy IV Philopator and the Jews, one taking place in Jerusalem, the other in Egypt. The narrative can be outlined as follows. After the Egyptian victory over the Seleucids at Raphia, which caused control of Palestine to be returned to Ptolemy Philopator, the king visited neighbouring cities to offer sacrifices in local sanctuaries. At Jerusalem, he admired the Temple and expressed his desire to enter, but the priests and populace begged him not to enter the holy precincts because such a thing was strictly forbidden. Philopator was proposing to sacrifice a bull in the Temple. When he insisted, the high priest Simon prayed that the defilement might be stopped.²⁰

This is the event depicted in the upper register of our panel, where the central figures should be Simon and Ptolemy Philopator, each accompanied by his entourage. M. Hadas noted that the high priest at the time of Ptolemy Philopator (221-204 B.C.) was Simon II, but perhaps the use of the name by the author of III Maccabees was intended to suggest Simon I, the Righteous (he died in 270), the story of whose meeting with Alexander the Great may be faintly echoed here.²¹ Simon the Righteous appears in 13 traditions in Rabbinic literature as a member of the Great Assembly or as a holy high priest.²² A *baraita* (a Tannaite tradition not included in the Mishnah) in the Babylonian Talmud (Megillah 11a) includes Simon’s name in a list of guardians who rescued the Jews under different gentile régimes. He is presented as a saviour during the time of the Greeks.²³ In late antiquity perhaps some people confused Simon I with Simon II due to the popularity of the story about his encounter with Alexander the Great.²⁴

The story in III Maccabees continues, reporting that, as soon as Philopator entered the Temple, God struck him with an epileptic attack. The king’s retinue removed him from the Temple. The king recovered but did not repent. He returned to Egypt and published a decree (cited below) stating that those Jews who rejected the Dionysiac mysteries would lose their civic rights. Very few, however, were prepared to give up their ancestors’ religion. The angered king ordered the transport of the Jews to a hippodrome near Alexandria, commanding that they be killed by drunken elephants. On the day when the decree was to be executed, the aged priest Eleazar prayed and two angels descended from heaven, visible to all but the Jews; they terrified the elephants, which turned in terror and crushed the king’s army instead of the Jews. Finally, the king repented and ordered that the Jews be lavishly entertained on the spot of their deliverance.²⁵

18 Parente *ibid.* 144-45.

19 M. Hadas (ed. and transl.), *The Third and Fourth Books of Maccabees* (Jewish Apocryphal Literature 3; New York 1953); Parente *ibid.* 143-81; *id.*, “III Maccabees and the tradition of patriotic romance,” *CdÉ* 47 (1949) 97-104; *id.*, “Third Maccabees and the Greek Romance,” *Review of Religion* 13 (1949) 155-62; J. Tromp, “The formation of the Third Book of Maccabees,” *Henoch* 17.3 (1995) 311-28; N. Hacham, *The Third Book of Maccabees: literature, history and ideology* (D.Phil. thesis, Hebrew Univ. of Jerusalem 2002) [Hebrew]; S. R. Johnson, *Historical fictions and Hellenistic Jewish identity; Third Maccabees in its cultural context* (Berkeley, CA 2004).

20 The narrative outlined here is based on Tromp *ibid.* 311-14.

21 Hadas (*supra* n.15) 38 n.1.

22 A. Tropper, *Simeon the Righteous in Rabbinic literature* (Leiden 2013).

23 *Ibid.*

24 “III Maccabees” contains many similarities to II Maccabees. The attempt by Philopator to enter the Holy of Holies resembles the attempt by Heliodorus to penetrate the treasury. In both books holidays are celebrated in honor of the deliverance; both mention a pious old man by the name of Eleazar and a miraculous epiphany. N. Hacham argues that the similarity between the two stories is not coincidental and that one author was influenced by the other: “Sanctity and the attitude towards the Temple in Hellenistic Judaism,” in D. Schwartz and Z. Weiss (edd.), *Was 70 CE a watershed in Jewish history?* (Leiden 2012) 155-80.

25 Parente (*supra* n.13) 146.

This, I believe, is the event depicted in the two lower registers of the Huqoq panel. In the middle register, the 9 arches topped with oil lamps represent the arches of a hippodrome.²⁶ Inside the central arch, the priest Eleazar sits on a throne flanked by young Jews in festive robes. Eleazar holds a scroll, which is probably the letter of protection for the Jews. He does not sit in the tribunal of the hippodrome but under an arch like the others, which helps the late-antique viewer not misinterpret him as a consul or emperor. III Maccabees (6.1) indeed presents him as first among equals:

Now a certain Eleazar, a man of note among the priests of the country, whose years had already reached old age, and who was adorned with every virtue of life ...

The lamps above the arches may indicate that the makers of the mosaic conceived the annual festival celebrated by the Jews in Egypt as a precedent to Hanukkah, to preserve the memory of the miracle.

In what remains of the bottom register, one sees a fallen (drunken?) elephant and collapsed Ptolemaic soldiers. The bull at the centre of the lower register serves to make the connection between the events depicted: the king sought to destroy the Jews because he was banned from entering the Temple and performing a sacrifice. The wounded bull may represent the animal that was meant to be sacrificed in honour of the ruler or his god. Another possibility is that the bull was connected to Ptolemy's decree mentioned above which was aimed against the Jews (III Maccabees 2.28-29, transl. Hadas):

That none of those who did not sacrifice (to the king) should be allowed to enter their temples; that all the Jews should be reduced to the popular census and slave condition; that those who spoke against it should be carried off by force and put to death; that those were registered branded by firepersons with an ivy, the emblem of Dionysos, and they should be recorded in their former limited status.

A version of the episode with elephants appears in Josephus's *Against Apion* 2.53-55, but there the incident in the Temple, shown in the upper register at Huqoq, is lacking. The elephant episode is also mentioned in 4 Byzantine chronicles which date between c.630 and 1047.²⁷ However, as shown by R. Fishman-Duker, the possibility of a close link between them and III Maccabees seems doubtful since significant features in III Maccabees are missing from the chronicles. The possibility that the chronicles are based on Josephus' *Against Apion* should also be excluded.

As stated by the Huqoq excavators, the occurrence of scenes derived from one of the Books of Maccabees in a synagogue is surprising; it would constitute the first time in which a narrative representation is associated with an "apocryphal" text. The Books of the Maccabees do, however, form part of the Christian canon. As Saint Augustine remarked (*Civ.D.* 18.36):

quorum supputatio temporum non in Scripturis sanctis, quae appellantur canonicae, sed in aliis invenitur, in quibus sunt Macchabaeorum libri, quos non Iudaei, sed Ecclesia pro canonicis habet propter quorundam martyrum passiones vehementes atque mirabiles, qui, antequam Christus venisset in carne, usque ad mortem pro Dei lege certaverunt et mala gravissima atque horribilia pertulerunt.

Thus [the books of the Maccabees] are held as canonical, not by the Jews, but by the Church, on account of the extreme and wonderful sufferings of certain martyrs, who, before Christ had come in the flesh, upheld the law of God even unto death, and endured most grievous and horrible evils (M. Dodds [ed.], *The works of Aurelius Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, a new translation* [Edinburgh 1871] 263).

26 Spectators at shows appear in Late Roman and Early Byzantine art in different media, including mosaics. See R. Lim, "In the 'Temple of Laughter': visual and literary representations of spectators at Roman games," in B. Bergmann and C. Kondoleon (edd.), *The art of ancient spectacle* (Studies in the History of Art 56; Washington, D.C. 2000) 343-66; and D. Favro, "The city is a living thing: the performative role of an urban site in ancient Rome, the Vallis Murcia," *ibid.* 210, fig. 4.

27 R. Fishman-Duker, "Remembering the elephants: III Maccabees 5-6 in Byzantine Chronicles," *Byzantium* 48 (1978) 51-63.

Augustine most probably does not refer to all four books but rather to II Maccabees and IV Maccabees, in which the virtues of martyrs, especially the martyrdoms of Eleazar and of Hannah with her 7 sons, are presented.²⁸ The martyrdom of the Maccabees was depicted on Christian objects in late antiquity, as seen on the Brescia casket.²⁹ Moreover, as mentioned above, a synagogue at Antioch named in honor of Hannah and her 7 sons was appropriated by the authorities and replaced by a church.³⁰ John Chrysostom delivered three homilies on the Maccabean martyrs: “On Eleazar and the Seven Boys” and two others “On the Maccabees”.³¹

During Chrysostom’s ministry at Antioch, the feast and the cult of the Maccabees was not only well-established, but firmly claimed by Christian populace.³²

The Maccabean martyrs prefigured the Christian martyrs: during the 3rd and 4th c. their rôle as proto-martyrs was discussed in homilies by Origen, Gregory of Nazianzus, John Chrysostom and Augustine.³³ Possibly the decision at Huqoq to depict the story of salvation narrated in III Maccabees was motivated by the desire for the opposite of martyrdom.³⁴ III Maccabees emphasizes divine deliverance and affirms the special status of the Jewish people as an object of God’s providence. Indeed, the events that occurred in the hippodrome of Alexandria stand in sharp contrast to a martyrdom. What occurred in both Jerusalem and Alexandria reveals the triumph of the righteous through prayers. The Jews refused to join in pagan worship but, unlike the martyrs, they were saved. Their deliverance by God then became the origin of a well-known feast.

In its content and ideas, III Maccabees was in full accordance with Jewish mentality in late antiquity, even though it was composed in the Hellenistic or Early Roman period. Three of the major points of this book are:³⁵

1. Prayers. We encounter prayers at the peak of each crisis (Simon prays in Jerusalem, Eleazar prays in the Alexandria hippodrome). Following the prayers come direct interventions by God. Each of the prayers mentions historical antecedents in which God punished the arrogant while saving the worthy. Two of those are indeed depicted in as-yet-unpublished panels from the Huqoq floor. Furthermore, the Jews founded a house of prayer (synagogue) at the site of their deliverance. As is well known, prayer became the principal form of worship in synagogues in late antiquity.
2. A denunciation as traitors of Jews who worshipped Dionysus (Dionysus appearing here as a covert reference to Christ). Jews of late antiquity may have found such a subject conversant as

28 *Eikhah Rabbati* (Midrash to Lamentation), the earliest Rabbinic version of the story of a mother and her 7 sons, does not contradict this rule: the historical context of those martyrs is not the era of the Maccabees, Eleazar is not mentioned, and the woman is called Miriam, daughter of Nachtom, and not Hannah.

29 R. L. McGrath, “The martyrdom of the Maccabees on the Brescia casket,” *ArtB* 47 (1965) 257-61.

30 Malalas, *Chronographia* (ed. Dindorf; Bonn 1831) 207; J. Obermann, “The sepulcher of the Maccabean Martyrs,” *J. Biblical Lit.* 50 (1931) 253-58; L. Roth-Gerson, *The Jews of Syria as reflected in the Greek inscriptions* (Jerusalem 2001) 248-50 [Hebrew].

31 For a translation of these three homilies, see W. Mayer and B. Neil, *St. John Chrysostom: the cult of the saints* (New York 2006) 119-54. Also see R. Ziadé, *Les martyrs Maccabées: de l’histoire juive au culte chrétien: Les homélies de Grégoire de Nazianze et de Jean Chrysostome* (Leiden 2007).

32 C. De Wet, “Claiming corporal capital: John Chrysostom’s Homilies on the Maccabean martyrs,” *J. Early Christian Hist.* 2.1 (2012) 3-21.

33 M. Schatkin, “The Maccabean martyrs,” *VigChr* 28.2 (1974) 97-113; G. Rouwhorst, “The cult of the seven Maccabean brothers and their mother in Christian tradition,” in M. Poorthuis (ed.), *Saints and role models in Judaism and Christianity* (Leiden 2004) 183-204; J. W. van Henten, “The Maccabean martyrs as models in Early Christian writings,” in D. Wertheim (ed.), *The Jews as legitimation* (Cham, Switzerland 2017) 17-32.

34 For the adoption of IV Maccabees by Christians in late antiquity, see T. Rajak, “The Maccabean martyrs in Jewish memory: Jerusalem and Antioch,” in R. S. Boustán, K. Herrmann, R. Leicht, A. Y. Reed and G. Veltri (edd.), *Envisioning Judaism. Studies in honor of Peter Schafer on the occasion of his seventieth birthday* (Tübingen 2013) vol. 1, 175-77.

35 For these characteristics of “III Maccabees”, see Hacham (supra n.15) 107-24 and 264.

many of their brethren converted to Christianity.

3. Religious loyalty to Judaism and political loyalty to the state are not contradictory.

The elephant panel, I believe, should be understood as a polemical statement directed against both pagans and Christians.

There remains the issue of the extent of the familiarity by Jews with III Maccabees when it was not part of the Hebrew Jewish Bible, even if it was included in the Septuagint. In view of the links between the text and the mosaic, there is reason to suppose that there were 4th-c. Jews who were familiar with the Septuagint, or at least with the Syrian translation of III Maccabees. Although the ritualistic reading of the Bible at a synagogue was necessarily in Hebrew, it would be accompanied by a Greek or Aramaic translation: Hebrew was considered a holy tongue, but Rabbis tolerated the use of Greek. Akylas's translation was a Greek Bible translation used by the Jews. Thought to have been made in the early 2nd c., it is much closer to the Hebrew text than any other Greek translation³⁶ and therefore was preferred by Rabbis; it was probably even used as a tool for learning Hebrew by Greek-speaking Jews.³⁷ Nevertheless, as N. de Lange also shows, we must take into account a certain fluidity in the use of a range of different translations. There were Jews in late antiquity who used other Greek translations, including the Septuagint:

In Greek-speaking synagogues where the practice of reading the Hebrew text had not yet taken hold, however, we may reasonably doubt that Akylas's translation would have been popular. Here we may imagine that the antiquity and prestige of the Septuagint will have made it the first choice.³⁸

Palestinian mosaics of the Late Roman/Early Byzantine period, and especially Galilean mosaics, exhibit close ties with Antioch. Understandably in view of its proximity and the possibility of reaching it by land, Antioch was the chief cultural centre for the inhabitants of *Palaestina*, and its art was a model to be emulated. We should take into account the possibility that the Huqoq mosaic reflects compositions ultimately derived from Antiochean synagogues. Greek was the dominant language among the Jews of Antioch. In all likelihood, some Antiochean Jewish communities made use of the Septuagint. But Greek was also common among the Jews of Palestine, with over 80% of the inscriptions at Bet She'arim, the central Jewish necropolis in Lower Galilee, written in Greek,³⁹ and we should not dismiss the possibility that there were communities in 4th-c. Palestine that read the Septuagint. For a Jew that read the Septuagint, scenes from III Maccabees were perceived as Biblical. Thus, their depiction does not contradict the norm of what was considered as suitable for decoration of synagogue floors, and we may view this panel as being Biblical in a certain sense.

In sharp contrast to II Maccabees and IV Maccabees, the book of III Maccabees (in spite of its inclusion in the Septuagint) was overlooked by Christians. Thus it was not problematic for the Jews to refer to the book. Nevertheless, one should not rule out the possibility that Jews who read the Septuagint also might depict scenes from I and II Maccabees. Such a possibility is raised by several scholars including H. Stern,⁴⁰ J. Gutmann,⁴¹ and K. Weitzmann and H. Kessler⁴² concerning one of the most controversial panels at Dura. Those scholars suggest that the panel should be identified as a depiction of Mattathias and the idolaters (I Macc. 2.15 and 24-25). Another depiction appears on a probably Jewish N African bowl dated to the 4th c. It portrays three young men dancing before a burning altar. Kessler⁴³ suggested that it is a depic-

36 N. de Lange, "The Greek Bible translations of the Byzantine Jews," in P. Magdalino and R. Nelson (edd.), *The Old Testament in Byzantium* (Washington, D.C. 2010) 44-45.

37 Id., *Japheth in the tents of Shem: Greek Bible translations in Byzantine Judaism* (Tübingen 2015) 57.

38 Ibid. 58.

39 L. I. Levine, *Visual Judaism in late antiquity: historical contexts of Jewish art* (New Haven, CT 2012) 81.

40 "Quelque problèmes d'iconographie paléochrétienne et juive," *CahArch* 12 (1962) 99-113.

41 "Early synagogue and Jewish catacomb art and its relation to Christian art," *ANRW* II.21.2 (1984) 1319.

42 *The frescoes of Dura Synagogue and Christian art* (Washington, D.C. 1990) 119-25.

43 In K. Weitzmann (ed.), *Age of spirituality: late antique and Early Christian art* (New York 1979) 484.

tion of the reconstruction of the altar of the Temple in Jerusalem in the time of the Hasmoneans, that came to be commemorated by the feast of Hanukkah (II Macc. 1:18-26).

The unearthing of the Huqoq synagogue has yet to be completed. We must patiently await the full exposure and official publication of the whole floor. Examination of the entire floor will help us to understand the criteria by which scenes were selected and enable us to consider the work as a whole. Will another scene from the Books of Maccabees appear? As they make clear from their subtitle (*Initial interpretations*), Britt and Boustan are well aware that it is too early to draw definite conclusions. Dura Europos was discovered almost a century ago but scholars still argue about the identification of some panels, the methods appropriate for studying the paintings, and the meaning of the entire programme. Naturally, there will be scholarly disagreements about the elephant panel at Huqoq, as well as about the rest of the floor, but at a relatively early stage Britt and Boustan have already managed to offer fresh insights that call into question old paradigms. The mosaics of the Huqoq synagogue are a remarkable discovery, and the "first official publication" is thought-provoking and challenging.

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