Archaeologists are reveling in the discovery of an ancient synagogue in northern Israel, a "monumental" structure with a mosaic floor depicting the biblical figure of Samson and a Hebrew inscription.

The synagogue -- dating to the fourth and fifth centuries in both the Talmudic and late Roman periods -- is in Huqoq, an ancient Jewish village in the country's Galilee region, the Israeli Antiquities Authority said.

Jodi Magness, a professor of early Judaism in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, said the building was found in a recent excavation.

She called the find "exciting" and described the "very high quality of the artwork" in the mosaic, crafted with "tiny colored stone cubes." Only a few late Roman period synagogues contained mosaics with biblical scenes, said Magness, one of the leaders of a U.S., Israeli and Canadian team engaged in the digs.

"This discovery is significant," she said, calling the site "extraordinary" and "stunning."

Samson was known for enormous physical strength and his fighting prowess against the Philistines, the enemy of the Israelites.

His story, recounted in the Bible's Book of Judges, mentions Delilah, a Philistine woman who worked to undermine Samson. She cut his hair after she persuaded Samson to reveal that his long hair was the secret to this strength.

Magness said the mosaic scene shows Samson putting torches between the tails of foxes. That image, from a vignette in the Book of Judges, is a reference to Samson exacting revenge on the Philistines by sending out flame-laden foxes to burn their lands.

She said the only other images of Samson in synagogues are at one nearby place in the Galilee known as Wadi Hamam, where Samson is seen "smiting" the Philistines with the jawbone of an ass. Another is in what is now modern Turkey, depicting scenes from Samson's life.

Samson is also depicted in early Christian art, she said.

Why is Samson portrayed and apparently revered in two synagogues close to each other? Magness said she plans to
find out.

The other image contains two apparently female faces flanking a circular medallion. It has a Hebrew inscription referring to rewards for carrying out good deeds.

"Our mosaics are also important because of their high artistic quality and the tiny size of the mosaic cubes. This, together with the monumental size of the stones used to construct the synagogue's walls, suggest a high level of prosperity in this village, as the building clearly was very costly," the authority said in its statement, citing Magness.