

Jesus in the Synagogues

Scholars agree that the origin of the synagogues is obscure. Synagogues are unmentioned in the Old Testament, and the earliest clear example comes from a reference to the construction of a synagogue in Egypt during the reign of Ptolemy III Euergetes (247-221 BC). The experience of Babylonian exile and the consequent scattering of Jews in various parts of the ancient world—Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Palestine—seems the reasonable background for the development of such a place for prayer and worship. It was not that the 2nd Temple built by Zerubbabel was discounted, of course, for Jews still made pilgrimage to Jerusalem to attend the *haggim* when possible. Still, in the century or so before the birth of Jesus, synagogues seem to have proliferated in the various Jewish communities, not only among the Diaspora, but also in the villages of Judea, Galilee, and Perea.

The Greek word συναγωγή (- synagogue) means “place of assembly,” and it is more-or-less a synonym for προσευχή (= house of prayer, chapel), both terms used widely among the Jews. While synagogues are known to exist in various parts of the Roman world, as is evident in Luke’s history of the travels of St. Paul, the synagogues in Palestine are the ones that concern us here. To date, some 16 synagogues have been identified that antedate the 1st Jewish Revolt.



The remains of the Gamla synagogue in upper Galilee east of the lake show the typical rectangular shape with stepped benches on all four sides.

include those at Capernaum (Mk. 1:21; Lk. 4:31-33; Jn. 6:59) and Nazareth (Mk. 6:1-2; Lk. 4:16). It is certain, of course, that he visited many others, but while the gospels do not

The entry portal to the Chorazin synagogue stands once more after being reconstructed by archaeologists from the rubble. As is usual, the synagogue is oriented facing southward toward Jerusalem, showing allegiance to the 2nd Temple.

Synagogues were intrinsic, not simply incidental, in the life and ministry of Jesus. He attended synagogue services weekly, “as was his custom” (Lk. 4:16). In his ministry, he preached, taught, disputed, and performed healings and exorcisms in them (Mk. 1:39; Mt. 4:23; Lk. 4:14-15; 4:43-44; Jn. 18:20). Here, he discussed and debated the interpretation and practical outcomes of the Torah (Mk. 3:1-6; Lk. 13:14-17; Jn. 6:30-59).

The Synagogues in Jesus’ World

Other than the several general references in the four gospels, the synagogues we know Jesus visited



NT ARCHAEOLOGY



“Moses’ seat” (Mt. 23:2). This was possibly a chair from which rabbis expounded the Torah or from which sermons were given in the synagogue service.

Two synagogue remains have been discovered at Magdala, the village of Mary, who was the first witness of Jesus’ resurrection. The first was uncovered in 2009 and the second in 2021. Ancient textual sources suggest the existence of multiple synagogues in a single community, as these two in the same village demonstrate. (Indeed, in Jerusalem alone, according to the Talmud, there were some 80 synagogues in prior to AD 70.)

What can be discerned from the remains indicates that this synagogue featured multi-colored wall frescoes and red painted columns. It had mosaics on the floor as well. Archaeologists also found a richly decorated stone (now dubbed “the Magdala Stone”), and its purpose is not immediately apparent. On it are carvings of a menorah, a rosette wheel, some columns, all of which are temple imagery and symbolize the 2nd Temple to the south in Jerusalem. Some scholars suggest that the stone may have been a table from which the Torah scrolls were read aloud, but this, at best, is an educated guess.

Excavations at Capernaum have exposed a 1st century synagogue lying beneath a 4th century synagogue, the older one dating to the time of Jesus. Both synagogues have nearly the same floor plan, but the lower one was constructed from the familiar black, basalt stone found also at Chorazin and Bethsaida. These hammer-dressed boulders were laid without mortar into walls nearly four feet thick. Pottery sherds and coins helped date the earlier structure, the site where Jesus preached and performed an exorcism (Mk. 1:21-25).

name the villages involved, they probably included places like Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Magdala.

Portions of the Chorazin synagogue, one of the cities Jesus upbraided because of a failure to repent (Mt. 11:2 Lk. 10:13), were reconstructed from the debris in preparation for the dedication of the site as a national monument. Of special importance was the discovery of a marble chair in the synagogue, a seat of honor that may correspond to what Jesus called



The first synagogue to be discovered at Magdala shows the typical rectangular shape. It would seat about 200 people.



This is the 4th century synagogue in Capernaum beneath which lies the remains of the ancient synagogue. The older synagogue is likely the one in which Jesus preached.

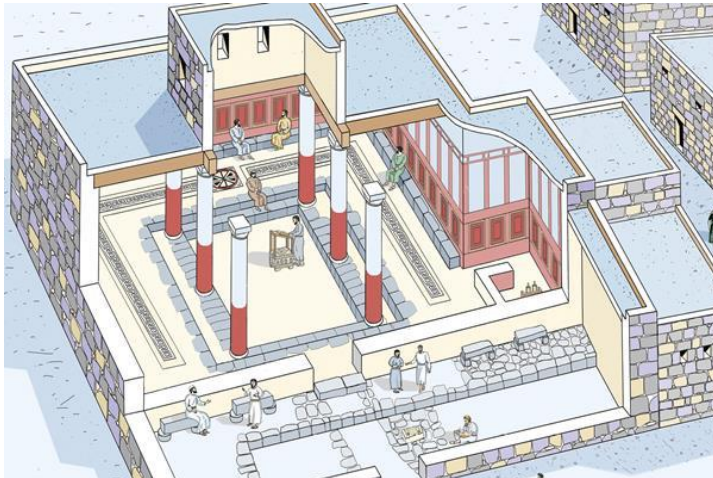
The synagogue at Meroth lies at the northern edge of Galilee. While Jesus may have visited it, there is no way of knowing, since the gospels typically do not specify the towns in which Jesus visited synagogues. We do know that he traveled in this area near Syro-Phoenicia (Mk. 7:24-26). This synagogue was discovered, not by a systematic archaeological survey, but by a fragment of a text found by a scholar in the Cambridge University library. Tracking down the geographical references in this ancient text eventually provided sufficient information for the discovery of the synagogue at Meroth.



This is the text found in the Cambridge University Library, one of 140,000 texts originally discovered in the Cairo Geniza.

Synagogue Debate and Discussion

Even the casual reader of the gospels will notice the many times Jesus seemed to be engaged in theological discussion and debate. Sometimes it concerned whether or not he was violating the law of the Sabbath by healing people on that holy day (Mk. 3:1-6; Lk. 6:14-17). At other times, it concerned issues like his remarkable statements about himself, such as, that he was the “true bread from heaven” (Jn.6:59).



This reconstruction of the synagogue at Magdala shows how it may have looked in the time of Jesus.

Actually, synagogues were very conducive to such discussions. Their quadrilateral layout with benches on all four sides meant that members of the congregation sat facing each other, an arrangement that facilitated discussion, especially between those seated on opposite walls.

Jesus in the Nazareth Synagogue

One of the most striking narratives concerning the synagogue occurred in Jesus' home town of Nazareth, where he was selected to read the passage

THE SYNAGOGUE SERVICE

Our knowledge of the synagogue liturgy comes to us from the Mishnah (the earliest written collection of Jewish oral traditions made in about the beginning of the 3rd century AD). The order of the service was:

- **Opening Benediction** (call to "bless" the Lord)
- **Recitation of the Shema** (Dt. 6:4-9; 11:13-21; Nu. 15:37-41)
- **Prayer** (from the lectern)
- **The Eighteen Benedictions** (from before the Torah ark), to which the congregation responded "Amen."
- **Public reading from the Torah**
- **Public reading from the prophets**
- **Sermon** (exposition of Scripture)
- **Concluding benediction**

READING ALOUD IN PUBLIC

Ancient Hebrew texts required more of the reader than we are accustomed to seeing in the modern world. There were no chapter or verse divisions, no paragraphing, no spacing between the words, and no punctuation. Hebrew was written in all consonants, so the reader was obliged to vocalize the text.

from the prophets (Lk. 4:16). Jesus had just returned to Galilee from Judea after his baptism and temptation in the desert. His custom was to attend the synagogue service, and the scroll of Isaiah was handed to him. At this period, the codex had not yet appeared, and the books of the Hebrew Bible were contained on individual scrolls. Unrolling the scroll, he found the passage in 61:1-2a and read the words concerning the Servant of Yahweh, the eschatological figure who dominates Isaiah 40-66. It is noteworthy that he stopped reading in mid-sentence, omitting the saying about judgment. Then Jesus sat down for the exposition, since the reading of Scripture in the synagogue service

was performed while standing, but the exposition was performed while seated. Up to this point, Jesus had not departed from customary procedure. The congregation sat expectantly, awaiting his comments on the passage, when Jesus exclaimed, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing!" It was obvious that Jesus was speaking about himself! Amazement was followed by incredulity, doubt, and then rejection.