



The Biblical Heritage Center's
DISCOVERING THE BIBLE

Following the journey of the memes of the Bible from their original cultural & historical origins to their influence in our world today.

2011 • NUMBER 4

Jesus and the Synagogue

By Jim Myers

Jesus never went to church. He did not found the First Christian Church of Jerusalem. *The place you would find Jesus on the Sabbath was a synagogue.*

He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom.¹

What happens during a synagogue service? I have met a lot of people that assume that a synagogue service must be about the same a church service when they read the above verse. So, they picture Jesus at a church service and move on with their reading. But the more we learn about what actually took place in the ancient synagogues the words reveal a great deal more about what actually took place that day. As we read Luke's words, picture yourself sitting in the synagogue that day and experience what it would have been like to be there.

Today prayer is an important part of the synagogue service, but things were very different while the Temple was still standing. An inscription found at an ancient synagogue reveals why it was built -- **for the reading of the law and for the teaching of the commandments**. In addition, it states that it included a hospice and chambers, along with a water installation for the lodging of needy strangers.² The one thing that was clearly missing was prayer.

Back then if somebody had approached the builder of that synagogue and asked, "Aren't people supposed to pray here?" -- his reply would have been, "Prayer? You want to talk to God? You see that big building on the top of that hill over there? That is where you talk to God. Don't forget to take an animal for the sacrifice because that is the way it is done at the time you talk to God."

As long as the Temple stood the synagogues in Judea and Galilee were Houses of Study (Bet Midrash). Rabbis, scribes, priests, students and the general public gathered to discuss community issues and events, as well as to hear and discuss

the sacred Jewish texts. The rabbis, scholars and special guests would give their interpretations of the texts that had been read and discuss how to apply them to daily lives. The purpose was to learn how to keep the covenant with God and improve the world in which they lived.

Early synagogues were simple structures that contained an ark in which the sacred scrolls were kept. Most were small, modest buildings, barely discernible as houses of worship from the outside. In many communities, a synagogue was no more than the bottom floor of a house. One of those small synagogues is the type that Jesus attended that day.

An important point that Luke made was that **it was the custom of Jesus to attend a synagogue on the Sabbath**. If you look at the contextual structure in which Luke records the story of Jesus you will find that different synagogues are the center of many of his activities. As a matter of fact, it is stated in the opening of Luke that the reason he undertook the project of writing the book was in order to create a more accurate account of the life of Jesus.³ The way he gathered the most accurate information was to interview “those who were eyewitnesses from the beginning.” The people he was referring to were the leaders of those synagogues.

The synagogue that Jesus attended that day was in Nazareth, the place where he had been brought up. He had probably attended many meetings in that synagogue over the years, along with the rest of his family and many of the others in attendance that day. When you attend a synagogue service today you are handed a prayer book and a book which contains the Scriptural readings, which include the order in which things will be done, but things were different back then. There was an order of service during the time of Jesus, but there were no books to hand out because they didn't exist.

Jesus would have entered the synagogue that day along with everyone else and taken a seat. The *nasi* (president)⁴ would have probably stood and walked up to the *bima*, a raised platform close to the ark where the scrolls were kept.⁵ He would have the announcements and probably recognized any visitors or special guests. Even though everyone had known Jesus for many years, Luke points out that some dramatic changes had recently taken place in his life, after he was baptized by John. He may have been recognized by the *nasi* that day, too.

Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. He was teaching in their synagogues, and everyone praised him.⁶

After the *nasi* finished the announcement the *chazzan* (cantor)⁷ would have walked up to the *bima* and asked everyone to stand and recite the *SHEMA*:

Hear, O Israel: YAHWEH our ELOHIYM; YAHWEH is One. And you shall love YAHWEH your ELOHIYM with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. And these words, which I command you this day, shall be upon your heart; and you shall teach them diligently unto your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the road, and when you lie down, and when you rise up. And you shall bind them for a sign upon your hand, and they shall be for frontlets between your eyes. And you shalt write them upon the door-posts of your house, and upon your gates.⁸

And it shall come to pass, if you shall hearken diligently unto My commandments which I command you this day, to love YAHWEH your ELOHIYM, and to serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul, that I will give the rain of your land in its season, the former rain and the latter rain, that you may gather in your grain, and your wine, and your oil. And I will give grass in your fields for your cattle, and you shall eat and be satisfied.

Take heed to yourselves, lest your heart be deceived, and you turn aside, and serve other ELOHIYMs, and worship them; and the anger of YAHWEH be kindled against you, and He shut up the heaven, so that there shall be no rain, and the ground shall not yield her fruit; and you perish quickly from off the good land which YAHWEH gives you.

Therefore you shall lay up My words in your heart and in your soul; and you shall bind them for a sign upon your hand, and they shall be for frontlets between your eyes. And you shall teach them your children, talking of them, when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the road, and when you lie down, and when you rise up. And you shalt write them upon the door-posts of your house, and upon your gates; that your days may be multiplied, and the days of your children, upon the land which YAHWEH swore unto your fathers to give them, as the days of the heavens above the earth.⁹

And YAHWEH spoke unto Moses, saying: 'Speak unto the children of Israel, and bid them that they make them throughout their generations fringes in the corners of their garments, and that they put with the fringe of each corner a thread of blue. And it shall be unto you for a fringe, that you may look upon it, and remember all the commandments of YAHWEH, and do them; and that you go not about after your own heart and your own eyes, after which you use to go astray; that you may remember and do all My commandments, and be holy unto your ELOHIYM. I am YAHWEH your ELOHIYM, who brought

you out of the land of Egypt, to be your ELOHIYM. I am YAHWEH your ELOHIYM.¹⁰

After the *SHEMA* was read everyone would have taken their seats and then the *chazzan* would have removed the **Torah scroll** from the ark and placed it on the *bima*. It contained the writings that are now found in the books of *Genesis*, *Exodus*, *Leviticus*, *Numbers* and *Deuteronomy*. A specific section was read each week which is called the *parashat hashavuah*.¹¹ This schedule of readings is called the "Triennial Cycle." The same schedule that was used during that period continued to be used by some synagogues until after 1000 CE. Today, synagogues use different Torah and *haftorah* reading schedules.

The most important part of a synagogue service is the reading of the Torah. It is an honor to receive an *aliyah*, an invitation to read a portion of the Torah to the congregation. The *chazzan* selected the readers for that day when they first arrived at the synagogue. After the Torah reading was completed, a section from the Prophets, called the *haftorah*, which literally means the "concluding portion" was read. The custom of reading the *haftorah* predates the Talmudic period. Some date it back to the time of King Antiochus, a 2nd century BCE Syrian-Greek who forbade the Jews to read from the Torah, but did not extend this ban to the Prophets. The *haftorah* was selected because of a thematic relationship to the weekly Torah reading or to that day or time period.

Thanks to Luke, we know that the *haftorah* Jesus read that day was Isaiah 61:1-2, which, when we find it in the "Triennial Cycle", reveals what the Torah reading for the day was, as well as the date of they met. The Torah portion for that day was Deuteronomy 15:7-17:13 and the date of the service was the fourth Shabbat of the month of Heshvan (October-November). It also tells us that the synagogue was in its third year of the Torah reading cycle.

A summary of the sections read from Deuteronomy 15:7 through 17:13 on that day are given below:

- (1) Treatment of the poor and needy (15:7-11)
- (2) Release of debtors every seventh year (15:12-18)
- (3) Laws of the firstborn (15:19-23)
- (4) Observe the feasts of Passover, Weeks and Tabernacles (16:1-17)
- (5) Conduct of judges (16:18-20)
- (6) Groves and images forbidden (16:19-20)
- (7) Only the best is to be sacrificed to God (17:1)
- (8) Idolaters to be stoned by witnesses (17:2-7)
- (9) Priests to be teachers and arbiters (17:8-13)

There were probably several blessings recited after the Torah readings were completed. The *chazzan* would have then rolled up the Torah scroll and placed it

back in the ark. It was at this point that he would have called for Jesus to come up to the *bima*. Jesus would have stood and walked up to the *bima* where the *chazzan* handed him the **scroll of Isaiah**. Jesus placed the scroll on the *bima* and found the *haftorah* reading for the day.

The *chazzan* may have intentionally selected Jesus to read those words of Isaiah in order to see what would happen. Jesus had already been teaching in other synagogues and there were rumors about him being the Messiah already circulating. We can only imagine what must have been going through the minds of everyone as they waited for Jesus to read. And then he read:

"The spirit of YAHWEH is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of YAHWEH's favor."

He rolled up the scroll and handed it back to the *chazzan*, and sat down. The place he sat was probably the spot reserved for teachers who gave their interpretations of the texts that day. Unlike in a church the teacher sits down to teach instead of standing behind a pulpit. Apparently, the *chazzan* had also invited Jesus to sit and teach after he finished his *haftorah* reading.

Then he said to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your ears."¹²

I doubt that we can imagine what the atmosphere became the moment Jesus spoke those words. Instead of providing the expected scholarly interpretation, he declared that what Isaiah had prophesied was now a reality. He was the one that the Spirit of YAHWEH was on. How do you think the audience responded?

And all bore witness to him and marveled at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, "Is this not the son of Joseph?"¹³

Based on what they do next, the above translation doesn't make sense. The fact that they would try to stone him doesn't indicate that they considered his word "gracious." The word translated "gracious" may also be translated "ungracious," which means "disrespectful" or "discourteous." A better translation would be:

And all bore witness to him and marveled at the disrespectful words that came from his mouth. They said, "Is this not the son of Joseph?"¹⁴

Every person in the synagogue had witnessed what he said. Don't forget that the Torah portion that had just been read to them contains the laws concerning the obligations of witnesses in the case of idolatry:

If it is true and it has been proved that this detestable thing has been done in Israel, take the man or woman who has done this evil deed to your city gate and stone that person to death. . . The hands of the witnesses must be the first in putting that person to death, and then the hands of all the people. You must purge the evil from among you.¹⁵

A clue as to why they may have reacted the way they did was also provided by Luke -- "Is this not the **son of Joseph**?" The first thing that usually comes to mind when modern readers read this is that it is a reference to Mary's husband, Joseph. But, "**Son of Joseph**" was also a well-known title for the Messiah. *Were they asking whether Jesus was the son of Joseph the carpenter or the Messiah?* Jesus' reply seems to leave little doubt as to which they had in mind.

"Surely you will say to me this parable: 'Physician heal yourself!' Do the same things here that we heard you did in Capernaum. Amen! No prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. The truth is that there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; but Elijah was sent to none of them except a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian."¹⁶

YAHWEH sent his "anointed prophets" to specific places and people. That was where and why the miracles took place. YAHWEH had sent him to Capernaum for the same reason, but YAHWEH had not sent him here to do miracles for them.

When they heard this, all in **the synagogue were filled with rage.** They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the edge of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might throw him off the cliff. But he walked through the crowd and went on his way.¹⁷

They didn't believe that he was the prophet predicted by Isaiah, and therefore he was guilty of being a false prophet. The Torah portion they had just heard specified what the responsibility of witnesses to such acts was -- they were obligated to stone him to death. But, either because of a miracle or simply because they were afraid to harm him, Jesus simply walked away unharmed.

Luke has provided us with what may be the clearest and possibly the most important evidence about Jesus' view of himself and, in particular, of his own place in God's plan for Israel and the world. He regarded himself as having full authority to speak and act on behalf of God. People who follow him would have a place in God's kingdom.

From the point of view of those who were not persuaded, he was arrogant and attributed to himself a degree of authority that was most inappropriate. But, from the point of view of his followers and sympathizers, he offered an immediate and direct route to God's love and mercy, establishing a relationship that would culminate in the final manifestation of the Kingdom of God.

Jesus was a charismatic and autonomous prophet; that is, *his authority (in his view) was not mediated by any human organization, not even by scripture*. A rabbi or a teacher of the law derived authority from studying and interpreting the Scriptures. Jesus doubtless did both, but it was not to his particular scriptural interpretation that he appealed for authority.

Jesus did not say to potential followers, "Study with me and I shall teach you the true interpretation of the Torah." He said, in effect, "Follow me because I am the one upon whom the spirit of God has come. I am God's agent called to establish His kingdom here and now. It is not my bloodline or a rabbinic school that gives me my authority. My authority comes directly from God!"

He also redefined the role of the Messiah. Instead of coming as a military leader to defeat the foreign oppressors, he was sent to free the poor and powerless from those who were oppressing them. His message focused on how they were being treated by people who worshipped the same God, and also by the foreigner. Eternal life would not be the reward for being a member of a tribe; it would be the reward for demonstrating one's love for God by loving one's fellowman. The question that we must consider, however, is whether the unknown author of Luke provided an accurate record of the events that took place here or whether he or later scribes redefine the mission of Jesus to fit the teachings of later Gentile church leaders. Stay tuned for more information. **BHC**

¹ Luke 4:16

² <http://jewishbeliefs.blogspot.com/2009/04/origins-of-prayer-prayer-in-bible.html>

³ Luke 1:1-4

⁴ <http://mi.yodeya.com/questions/3597/what-are-the-hebrew-titles-for-synagogue-functionaries-in-various-communities>

⁵ <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/bima>

⁶ Luke 4:14-15

⁷ <http://www.jewfaq.org/rabbi.htm>

⁸ Deuteronomy 6:4-9

⁹ Deuteronomy 11:13-21

¹⁰ Numbers 15:37-41

¹¹ http://www.myjewishlearning.com/texts/Bible/Weekly_Torah_Portion.shtml

¹² Luke 4:21

¹³ Luke 4:22

¹⁴ Luke 4:22

¹⁵ Deuteronomy 17:2-7

¹⁶ Luke 4:23-28

¹⁷ Luke 4:28-30

April Memorials

In Loving Memory

**WILLIAM
LESTER
STEWART**

April 26, 2005

*May you dwell under His
wings in complete
SHALOM forever!*



In Their Remembrance

*May their memories inspire us to
seek those qualities of mind and
heart which they shared when we
walked life's journey together.*

*May we help to bring closer to
fulfillment their highest ideals and
noblest strivings.*

*May their memories deepen our
loyalty to those things which we
valued and shared --
faith, love, peace and devotion
and our biblical heritage.*

*As long as we live, they too will
live; for they are now a part of us,
as we remember them.*

(Inspired from prayers found in Yitzhor
Reflections - The New Mahzor - The
Prayer Book Press)

In Loving Memory

**GEORGE
WASHINGTON
HARLESS**

October 1864
April 6, 1923

*May you dwell under His
wings in complete
SHALOM forever!*



Remembering those who came before us is a very important part of the Biblical Heritage Center's mission. It is our privilege to honor them by the BHC Memorial Garden and Memorials which are printed in this newsletter. The Memorial Garden is on the website at <http://www.biblicalheritage.org>. Please visit it the next time you are on the Internet and stop back by often. If you would like to add your loved one to this section, send the information to us. There is no charge, but donations are accepted. Remember those who have meant so much to you with a BHC Memorial.

**PRAY & WORK FOR THE PEACE AND PROTECTION OF
ISRAEL IN THESE DAYS OF UNCERTAINTY AND
UNREST IN THE MIDDLE EAST.**

BHC Welcomes Your Support

BHC's primary mission is to provide factual information that will help people make quality decisions related to life, religion and spirituality. BHC is not a religious organization and thus has no official "Statement of Faith" or "Religious Creed." It is an independent organization that adheres to the Primary Guideline:

**"Belief systems must be large enough to include all of the facts;
they must be open enough to be tested;
and they must be flexible enough to change
when errors or new facts are found."**

One of BHC's primary missions is to provide gather and share factual information about the histories of Christianity and Judaism, which are the biblical heritages of over two-billion people. BHC distributes information through its newsletters - *Discovering the Bible*, and *Facts & Beliefs Report* - and on the BHC website, BHC Blog, BHC Google Group, Twitter, BHC Facebook Page.

BHC is funded by the generous financial gifts of those who share our commitment to the inclusion of as much factual information as is available in belief systems. More people understand the importance of this commitment after the terrorists' attacks that have changed life in America. What people believe matters!

Please support our work by making a generous donation now. We rely on your financial gifts to make our work possible. The Biblical Heritage Center, Inc. is a 501(c)(3) non-profit corporation that is funded by the donations given by individuals.

Donations may be made online at - <http://www.biblicalheritage.org/BHC/donate.htm>

Or, you may mail your donation to:

**Biblical Heritage Center
PO Box 79
Cleburne, TX 76033-0079**

Thank you for reading this newsletter. If you do not receive our publications & updates online and would like to receive them as well as BHC Updates - join the BHC Google Group - <http://www.biblicalheritage.org/bhcpub.htm>