

DISCOVERING THE BIBLE & OUR BIBLICAL HERITAGES

Providing factual information about our Bibles, beliefs, movements, institutions and events of historical Christianity & Judaism.

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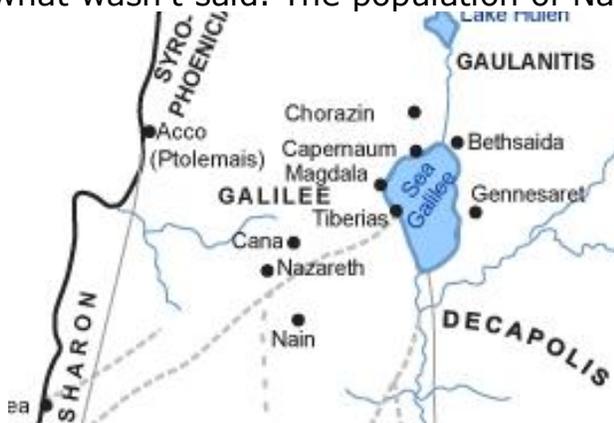
A Trip With Jesus to His Synagogue

By Jim Myers

The original authors of the words found in our Bibles wrote them for someone. It can be safely assumed that those writing the words believed that the people they were writing to understood not only what they did say as well as a great deal of what they did not say. *It is amazing what we can learn about what wasn't said from a couple of sentences sometimes, i.e., those recorded in Luke 4:16-17a.*

Jesus came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and went into the synagogue on Shabbat, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him.

Let's begin by see what is said. The first things we learn is that Jesus had been brought up in Nazareth, had been away, and had just returned. Now let's look at what wasn't said. The population of Nazareth was about 500 people.¹ Nazareth



Reconstruction of First-Century Nazareth
SOURCE²

had never been an attractive place. It was muddy in winter, dusty in summer, streets wound around haphazardly, and houses were so close together that people on the flat roofs could talk from house to house. Food, clothes, rugs, pots, spices and perfumes were sold in disorderly, colorful, aromatic heaps by merchants. There was little traffic on streets that were so narrow that a donkey carrying a bulky load might block them. When it was cool, in the morning and evening, women carried large pitchers to the village well to fill them up.³

Next, we learn that "Jesus went to the synagogue on Shabbat, as was his custom." It wasn't just Jesus who had the custom of going to a synagogue every Shabbat, so did all of his followers, as well as the other Jews. Why? Keeping the Shabbat was the law of the land. It was written in the Torah and recorded on the stone tablets God gave to Moses. *It was the fourth of the Ten Commandments.*

Remember the Shabbat day by keeping it set apart. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Shabbat to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but He rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Shabbat day and set it apart.⁴

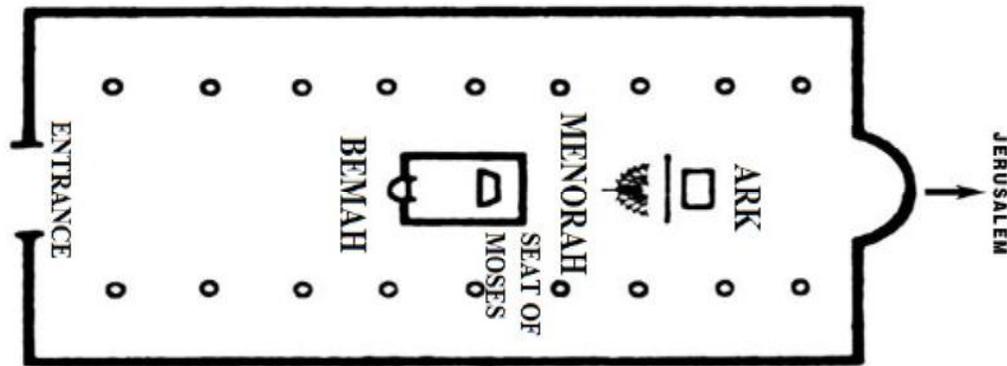
Shabbat was set apart from the other six days, which in Hebrew means it was holy. Work ceased at sundown on the sixth day (Friday) and did not begin again until after sundown on the Shabbat (Saturday). What they did on Shabbat, beside not work, was determined by the leaders at the Temple and those of the various sects – Sadducees, Pharisees, Essenes, etc. – *but the synagogue played a central role.*

Theodotus, a Greek historian,⁵ noted that there was an important difference between synagogues in Israel and those outside the land. The central focus of all synagogues was to teach the Torah – *Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers & Deuteronomy.* Synagogues in Israel, however, were not "houses of prayer."⁶ *In the land of Israel there was only one **House of Prayer** -- the Temple.*

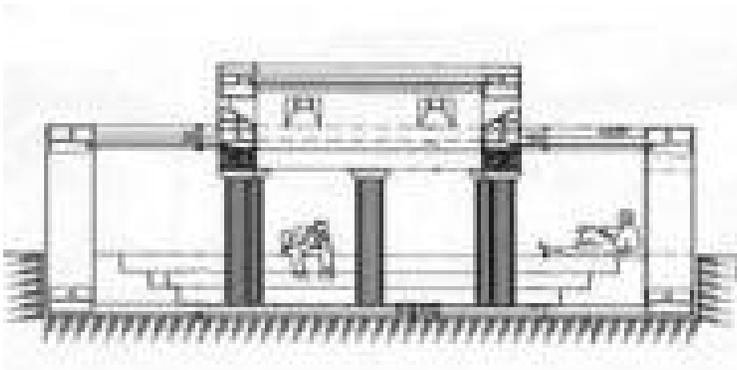
And foreigners who bind themselves to the LORD to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants, **all who keep the Sabbath** without desecrating it and who hold fast to my covenant — these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my **House of Prayer**. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house will be called a **House of Prayer** for all nations. (Isaiah 56:6-7)

Synagogues in Israel were *houses of study*, as well as *community meeting centers*. Jesus would have gone to the synagogue in Nazareth many times during his life, just as all of the other Jews did that he taught in Galilee, Samaria, and Judea. Synagogues were the center of community life and many even had places where people traveling through the town could spend the night.

Synagogues shared a number of things in common. The physical alignment of every synagogue pointed in the direction of the Temple in Jerusalem, so the congregation faced the Temple as they participated in the services, recited Scriptures, and were taught the Torah.



When we walked through the entrance with Jesus we see that the seating was on benches, like bleachers, and not in pews. There was a raised platform called a **BEMA** in the middle, a **MENORAH** (a seven-branched candlestick), and an **ARK**.⁷



The **ARK** contained **scrolls** that were stored behind a veil, located at the place closest to Jerusalem. **The Seat of Moses**⁸ was on the raised area so everyone could see the teacher. You may remember when Jesus said: *"The scribes and the Pharisees sit in **Moses' seat**: All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do"*⁹ Now you know where they were sitting – in a synagogue.



The Seat of Moses

One of the first people we would have encountered when we entered the synagogue was the **HAZZAN** (ruler of the synagogue). After greeting us he would have asked Jesus if he would be the *Sheliach Tzibbur* (the representative of the people). According to the *Mishnah*, the person who read the portion from the Prophets was also expected to lead

the opening blessings, as well as conduct the teachings after the reading of the Prophets. Since Jesus read from Isaiah that day, then it appears that he was also the *Sheliach Tzibbur* that day. Jesus would have led us to a place to sit, probably next to members of his family, who also attended services at the same synagogue with him: *"Isn't this the carpenter's son? Isn't his mother's name*

Mary, and aren't his brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas? Aren't all his sisters with us?"¹⁰



SOURCE¹¹

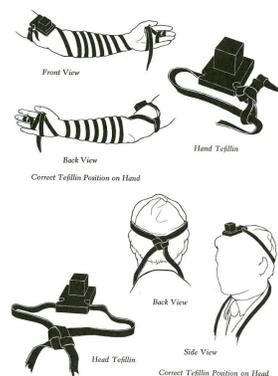
When it was time for the service to begin the **HAZZAN** would have walked up to the **BEMA** and introduced Jesus as the *Sheliach Tzibbur*. The first thing Jesus, and the other men would have done before reciting the blessings and commandments that marked the beginning of the service would be cover their heads with the **TALLIT**. Men wore a four-cornered garment called a **TALLIT**, a garment that is linked to the commandments. Every man would have been wearing one because it was how they kept a

a commandment that they recited at every Shabbat service.

People did not bring Bibles to the synagogue, because there weren't any. Scriptures were written on scrolls and most people were not wealthy enough to purchase a Torah scroll, much less others scrolls. In addition to the price, many could not read; they memorized blessings, prayers and large portions of the Scriptures. Jesus began the service by reciting the *Shema*:

Hear, Israel, the LORD is our God, the LORD is One. Blessed be the Name of His glorious kingdom for ever and ever. And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be in your heart. And you shall teach them diligently to your children, and you shall speak of them when you sit at home, and when you walk along the way, and when you lie down and when you rise up. And you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be for frontlets between your eyes. And you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.¹²

The way they kept the commandment of "binding the commandments on their hand and between their eyes" was by the use of **TEFILLIN**. Rabbi Hayim Halevy Donin explains how **TEFILLIN** are used: "The **TEFILLIN** (called *phylacteries* in the New Testament) consist of two small black boxes, containing small scrolls of parchment upon which are written four Biblical passages (Exodus 13:1-10; 13:11-16; Deut. 6:4-9; and 11:13-21). These four passages from the Torah (five books of Moses) all include the commandment to wear **TEFILLIN** as a sign, as a



SOURCE¹³

symbol of Jewish faith and devotion. Each of the black boxes comes with leather straps so designed as to enable one to be bound upon the hand and for the other to be worn above the forehead."¹⁴ After the *Shema* Jesus would lead the congregation in reciting Deuteronomy 11:13-21.¹⁵

And it shall come to pass if you surely listen to the commandments that I command you today to love the Lord your God and to serve him with all your heart and all your soul, that I will give rain to your land, the early and the late rains, that you may gather in your grain, your wine and your oil. And I will give grass in your fields for your cattle and you will eat and you will be satisfied.

Beware, lest your heart be deceived and you turn and serve other gods and worship them. And anger of the Lord will blaze against you, and he will close the heavens and there will not be rain, and the earth will not give you its fullness, and you will perish quickly from the good land that the Lord gives you. So you shall put these, My words, on your heart and on your soul; and you shall bind them for signs on your hands, and they shall be for frontlets between your eyes.

And you shall teach them to your children, and you shall speak of them when you sit at home, and when you walk along the way, and when you lie down and when you rise up. And you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. In order to prolong your days and the days of your children on the land that the Lord promised your fathers that he would give them, as long as the days that the heavens are over the earth.

The third recitation for the service that day is from Numbers 15:37-41.¹⁶

And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak to the children of Israel and say to them they should make themselves **TZITZIT** (fringes) on the corners of their clothing throughout their generations, and give the **TZITZIT** of each corner a thread of blue. And they shall be **TZITZIT** for you, and when you look at them you will remember all of the LORD's commandments and do them and not follow after your heart and after your eyes which lead you astray. In order to remember and do all My commandments, and be holy for your God. I am the LORD, your God who led you from the land of Egypt to be a God to you. I am the LORD, your God.

The garment mentioned above that Jesus used to cover his head, called the **TALLIT**, had the **TZITZIT** attached its four corners. Every man at the synagogue that day would have been wearing them, including Jesus. *Remember when the woman touched the fringe of his garment and was healed? The fringe she touched was one of the **TZITZIT** hanging from his **TALLIT**.*

ק	=	90
י	=	10
ק	=	90
י	=	10
ק	=	400
		600
		+ 8 = Threads
		+ 5 = Knots
		613

source¹⁸

The number 613 equaled the total number of commandments of the Torah and reminded the person wearing or seeing them of his obligation to keep them.

After Jesus finished leading congregation in the above recitations, he would have set back down. The **HAZZAN** would have then gone to the Ark, pulled back the veil, and lifted up the Torah Scroll. He would have carry it to the **BEMA**, unroll it until he found the Torah reading scheduled for that day.

The synagogues followed a Torah reading schedule that determined what would be read each Shabbat in the synagogues. The Torah reading that day gives us the date that Jesus attended the synagogue. It was the fourth

Shabbat of the month of Heshvan (Cheshvan). This year that date will be November 9-10. The Torah reading that day was Deuteronomy 15:7-17:13. (Please read the scheduled reading for the day from your Bible.)

The **HAZZAN** would have selected at least seven individuals to read portions of it. After the final reader the **HAZZAN** would roll up the Torah Scroll and return it to the Ark. He then took out the scroll of Isaiah and carried it to the **BEMA**. He then called **Yeshua ben Yosef** to come forth, the Hebrew name of Jesus. He would stood, walked up to the Bema, and taken the scroll.

He unrolled the scroll and found the place . . .¹⁹

This sounds very simple, but it is not like opening your Bible to the verse you want to read. Below is a picture of the Great Isaiah Scroll from Qumran.²⁰ It is made up of 17 strips of leather that were sewn together to make the scroll.²¹



It is particularly large, being about 24 feet (730 cm) long and 11 inches (28 cm) high with 54 columns of text.²² Jesus found the section at the 49th column, 4 lines from the bottom and he read:

“The Spirit of ADONIA is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to

the captives and the regaining of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of ADONIA's favor."²³ Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fixed on him."²⁴

Luke left us an important clue about what happened next -- "*the eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fixed on him.*" Above we learned that the reader of the Prophets was invited to teach afterwards. Jewish teachers sat when they taught, and the place they sat was in the **Seat of Moses**, a place everyone could have seen them.

Then he began to tell them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled even as you heard it being read."²⁵

Luke doesn't include what Jesus taught that day, *but it is clear that he redefined the role of the Messiah from being the military leader that they expected would come and defeat the foreign oppressors (the Romans) to one that God sent to free the poor, blind and oppressed from their oppressors – Jew or Gentile.* Many either missed his point or rejected it because they expected him to do mighty works like he had done at other synagogues.²⁶ *They wanted him to do what they expected, but what he told them that God wanted them to do what He expected.*

By knowing what took place in the synagogue, which is what the writer doesn't say, opens a treasure chest of information that helps us much better understand him, how he dressed, what he did and why, when and where he went, and what he taught. The earliest readers of the Gospels knew that information because they also did the same things. *Neither Jesus nor any of his original followers ever attended a church, read a New Testament, or **believed that beliefs determined one's eternal destiny.*** Jesus did not found the first church or tell his followers to do it. As a matter of fact, even after the crucifixion, the apostles required all Gentile converts to keep Shabbat, attend a synagogue, and listen to the teachings of the Torah and the Prophets. Does your church require it?

It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. **For the Torah of Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Shabbat.**²⁷

The final sentence includes two requirements that are usually missed by translators, but the apostles and the Holy Spirit required Gentile converts to *keep the Shabbat; and, hear the Torah of Moses read at a synagogue.* **DTB**

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BIBLICAL HERITAGE CENTER'S October Memorials

In Their Remembrance

In Loving Memory

**JEWELL G.
PATTERSON**

March 14, 1907
October 1, 1995

May you dwell under
His wings in complete
SHALOM forever!

*May the memories of our loved ones
inspire us to seek in our lives those
qualities of mind and heart which we
recall with special gratitude.
May we help to bring closer to
fulfillment their highest ideals and
noblest strivings.
May the memories of our loved ones
deepen our loyalty to that which cannot
die -- our faith, our love, and devotion
to our spiritual heritage.*

Inspired by (Yitzhor Reflections ó The New
Mahzor ó The Prayer Book Press)

In Loving Memory

Calvin P.
*A SPECIAL FRIEND
OF BHC*

1914
October 17, 2003

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 the Memorial Garden the next time you are online and stop by often. If you would like to add a loved one, send their information to us. There is no charge, but donations are accepted. Share your memories about those who mean so much to you with a BHC Memorial.

- ¹ <http://sites.duke.edu/holylandarchaeology/2012/01/06/the-nazareth-experience-by-harrison-hines/>
- ² <http://www.1journey.net/stdavids/SD/BookStudy/22/TheTimes/03-Nazareth-1Cent-Reconstruction.jpg>
- ³ <http://www.bible-lands.net/cities/nazareth/nazareth-daily-life>
- ⁴ The Fourth Commandment – Exodus 20:8-11
- ⁵ <http://www.earlyjewishwritings.com/theodotus.html>
- ⁶ Josephus, Life 277, 280, and 293
- ⁷ http://scheinerman.net/judaism/_images/menorah-1.jpg
- ⁸ http://www.hebrewyeshua.com/in_search_of.html
- ⁹ Matthew 23:2-3
- ¹⁰ Matthew 13:55-56
- ¹¹ <http://stephencuyos.com/3rd-sunday-in-ordinary-time-homilies-images-slides-and-video/>
- ¹² <http://www.jewfaq.org/prayer/shema.htm>
- ¹³ <http://emp.byui.edu/SATTERFIELDB/Tefillin/phyllacteries.htm>
- ¹⁴ *To Be a Jew*, Rabbi Hayim Halevy Donin; p. 145
- ¹⁵ <http://www.jewfaq.org/prayer/shema.htm>
- ¹⁶ <http://www.jewfaq.org/prayer/shema.htm>
- ¹⁷ <http://www.kippahdesign.com/images/tzitzit.gif>
- ¹⁸ <http://rabbiellimallon.files.wordpress.com/2011/11/tzitzit-5.png>
- ¹⁹ Luke 4:17
- ²⁰ <http://www.allaboutarchaeology.org/images/great-isaiah-scroll.jpg>
- ²¹ <http://www.ao.net/~fmoeller/gum-intr.htm>
- ²² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isaiah_scroll
- ²³ Isaiah 61:18-19
- ²⁴ Isaiah 61:20-21
- ²⁵ Luke 4:21
- ²⁶ Mark 6:2-3
- ²⁷ Acts 15:19-21

**Understanding what a writer DID NOT say –
may be just as important as what he did say.**

**Knowing what happened at Jesus’ synagogue opens a treasure chest of information
that helps us much better understand him, how he dressed, what he did and why,
when and where he went, and what he taught his followers.**

**We want to provide much more information about the world in which the authors
of the books of the Bible lived to help you recognize & understand what they did &
did not say.**



Our goal is to find and share the most culturally accurate factual information possible, so you will be able to make the best decisions about the above & many other things.

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