

THE RISE OF THE SYNAGOGUE IN BIBLICAL TIMES

In this article we explore the synagogues which emerged during the time between the Old and New Testament and continued to be used into the first century AD.

What happened in those nearly 400 years that changed how and where the Jews gathered for worship and ceremony?

How did the influence of the Greeks and the Roman Empire impact worship, freedoms, and the spread of Jewish teachings?

Is there evidence that Jews were worshipping in distant synagogues during the Second Temple period before the Romans finally destroyed the Jerusalem Temple in 70 AD?



STRIPLING SYNAGOGUE TYPOLOGY

Type I

Synagogues which date to the third century BC or earlier. These are only known through literary references or inscriptions. In the eastern coastal region of north Africa, near what is now Benghazi, Libya, the Berenike Synagogue may have been one of those constructed in the third century BC.

Type II

Synagogues confirmed by archaeology to be from the second century BC up to 70 AD.

Type IIA

Synagogues from the Hasmonean period that did not continue in usage in the New Testament period (30–66 AD) such as the Jericho synagogue.

Type IIB

Synagogues that functioned up to the outbreak of the First Jewish Revolt in 66 AD

Type IIB1 North of Egypt.

Type IIB2 In Egypt.

Type IIC Built from earlier structures during the First Revolt (66–70 AD) such as Masada and Herodium.

Type III

Synagogues post 70 AD.

Type IIIA

Built between the First Revolt and the Second Revolt (132–136 AD) such as Harvat 'Ethri and Shikhin.

Type IIIB

Built after the Second Jewish Revolt and before the Battle of the Yarmuk (636 AD).

By Scott Stripling

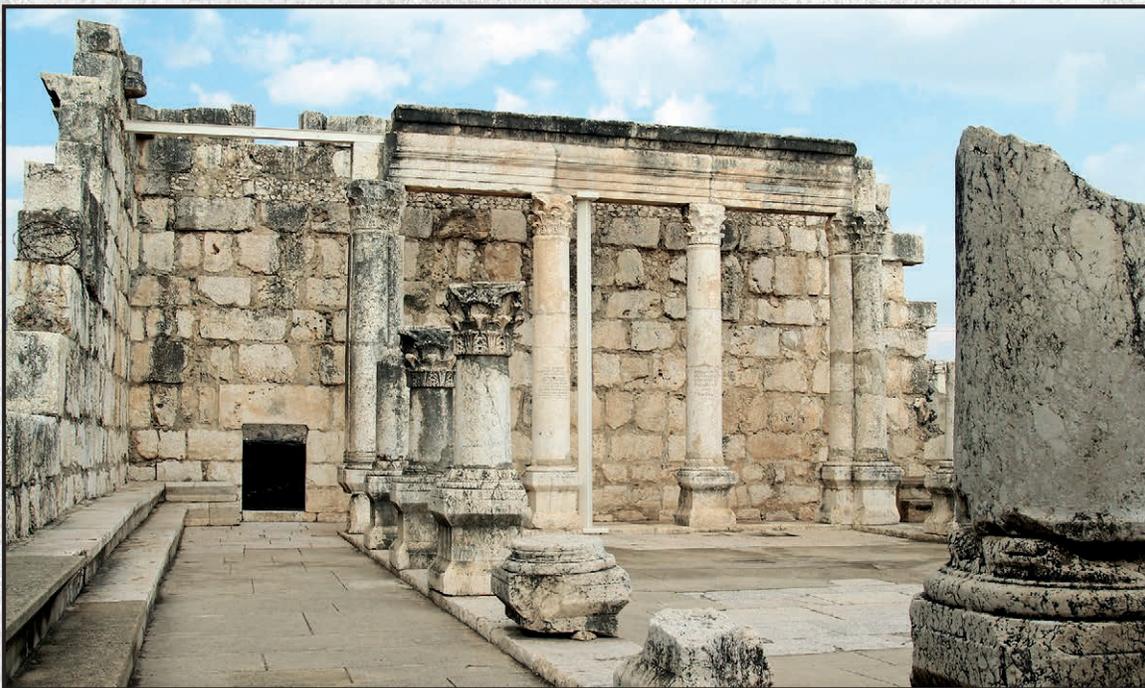
In biblical times, synagogue structures were public buildings used by Jews for civic and religious gatherings. The religious gatherings focused on study of the Hebrew Bible and prayer. The word synagogue appears 69 times in the New Testament, but not a single time in the Old Testament. Clearly there was a big shift in the so-called intertestamental period in how and where Jews worshiped. Jodi Magness¹ who is currently excavating a fifth-century AD synagogue at Huquq (Stripling Type IIIB) in the northwestern Galilee suggests five possibilities for the emergence of the synagogue system:

1. Prior to the destruction of the first temple (587 BC) in response to the centralization of worship in the reforms of Josiah and Hezekiah. While centralization late in the First Temple period may have begun to establish a cultural milieu out of which the synagogue system would later grow, it seems highly unlikely that synagogues existed prior to 587 BC. If they did exist, they left no footprint in the literary or archaeological records.
2. During the Babylonian exile to serve the needs of the diaspora community. Jews no doubt congregated for Torah study and prayer during the Babylonian exile, but like the previous theory, this hypothesis lacks literary or archaeological support.
3. As part of the reorganization of Jewish life in the post-exilic period under Ezra and Nehemiah. While Ezra records gatherings of Jews in this period, there is no indication in the literary or archaeological records that these gatherings represented anything like what the New Testament portrays as the synagogue system.
4. During the third century B.C. among diaspora Jews in Alexandria, Egypt, thus enabling them to maintain their cultural and religious identity. Dynamic changes in Judaism

clearly began to occur in the mid-third century B.C. The greatest evidence of this is the translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek. This translation became known as the Septuagint (LXX). A number of inscriptions from this time document Jewish houses of prayer (Greek proseuchae), but none of these structures has survived.

5. After the Hasmonean revolt (167–164 BC) resulted in Jewish independence. The deuterocanonical book of Ecclesiasticus dates to about 180 BC and does not mention synagogues. This could indicate that they did not yet exist. Magness sees this as a weak argument from silence, but it is bolstered by the fact that the first evidence of synagogue buildings appears in the Hasmonean period. Other changes in the material culture such as the use of stone vessels, ritual immersion, and ossuary burial also begin around this time.

In summary, theories 1–3 contribute to an environment which is conducive to an emergent synagogue system. The impetus for decentralization likely derives from the destruction of the first temple in 587 BC. Jews could not sacrifice, so they focused on worshiping God through studying Scripture and prayer. Following the rebuilding of the temple and the reorganization of Jewish life in the post-exilic period, the prototype of the synagogue (Stripling Type I) likely emerged in Alexandria concomitant with the translation of the LXX. During the Hasmonean period (167–63 BC) in the Holy Land the first clearly identifiable synagogues appear as typified by the Modiin and Jericho synagogues. All synagogues that existed during the Hasmonean, Herodian, and Early Roman periods (up to AD 70) comprise Stripling Type II. This includes the synagogues mentioned or alluded to in the New Testament (Stripling Type IIIB) which this article explores. I classify all post-AD 70 synagogues as Type III. The Type III synagogue always orients toward Jerusalem, unlike its predecessors.



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The restored fourth century AD synagogue at Capernaum. Beneath this striking white limestone edifice (Stripling Type IIIB) there are extensive remains of the synagogue from Jesus' day. The Bible references this synagogue more than any other and it is believed that Jesus made Capernaum the headquarters for his Galilean ministry.

A new class of religious leaders, known as Pharisees, oversaw the synagogue system, a fledgling brand of decentralized Judaism, while the Sadducees controlled worship in the central temple in Jerusalem. According to Rachel Hachlili², “Archaeological evidence for the existence of synagogues in the Second Temple period is inconclusive.” Howard Clark Kee³ goes even further by outright denying the existence of synagogues prior to AD 70. As we will see, the New Testament references to synagogues find ample support in the archaeological record.

Synagogues in the New Testament

The New Testament directly mentions twelve cities which had synagogues:

1. Antioch (Pisidia) – Acts 13:14–15, 42
2. Athens – Acts 17:17
3. Berea – Acts 17:10
4. Capernaum – Mk 1:21–23, Mt 8:14, Mt 9:18–23, Lk 6:6, Lk 7:5, and Jn 6:59
5. Corinth – Acts 18:4, 7–8, 17
6. Damascus – Acts 9:2, 20 (plural)
7. Ephesus – Acts 18:19, 26; 19:8
8. Iconium – Acts 14:1
9. Jerusalem – Acts 6:9 (Freedman’s Synagogue), Jn 9:22, Jn 12:42, Jn 16:2, Acts 24:12 (plural)
10. Nazareth – Mt 13:54, Mk 6:2; Lk 4:15–28
11. Salamis (Cyprus) – Acts 13:5 (plural)
12. Thessalonica – Acts 17:1–2

Jerusalem, Damascus, and Salamis apparently had multiple synagogues. The synoptic evangelists make it clear that Jesus ministered in synagogues throughout Galilee (Mt 4:23, 9:35, 12:9;

Mk 1:39; Lk 4:14, 13:10–14), and John documents the same for synagogues in Judea (Jn 18:20). John also mentions synagogues in Smyrna (Rev 2:9) and Philadelphia (Rev 3:9), but in light of Revelation’s apocalyptic genre, it is unclear if these references are merely metaphorical.

Excavations at Bet Shemesh, Gamla, H. et-Tuwani, Magdala, Modiin, and Qiryat Sefer have revealed additional synagogues from the New Testament era. Jacob Ory documented a synagogue at Chorazin, probably from the late Second Temple Period. An inscription from the North African city of Berenike refers to repairs on a synagogue in Nero’s second year (AD 55). Since the synagogue needed repairs, it is likely that it had been in existence for several generations, possibly as early as the third century BC. Thus, it could be classified as a Type I synagogue. Craig Evans⁴ believes that the Berenike inscription is incontrovertible proof of the existence of early synagogues, because “in this inscription we see the Greek word *synagōgē* used in both senses of congregation and building.”

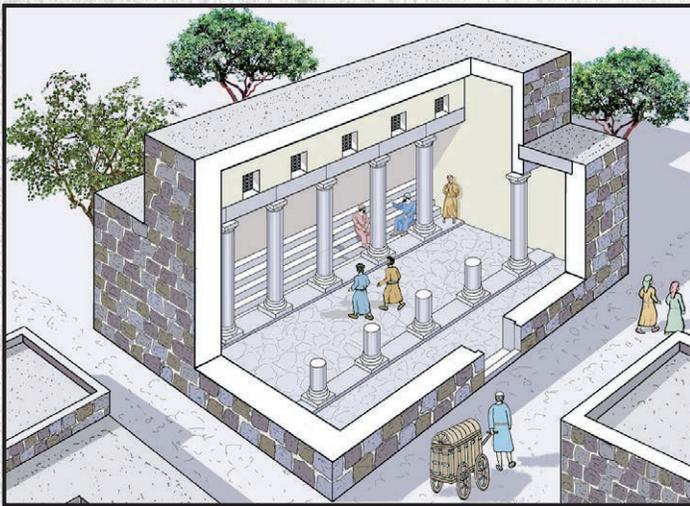
Thus, through synchronizing New Testament references with archaeological findings, we currently can identify 23 New Testament era synagogues. The first-century synagogues built at Masada and Herodium during the Great Revolt (Stripling Type IIC) are not counted here, nor are the synagogues mentioned by Josephus, such as the ones at Syrian Antioch (*War* 7.44–45) and Caesarea Maritima (*War* 2.285–89), Philo (*A.F.* 380–81), and other sources. I also have omitted the disputed synagogues at Shuafat and Qumran (Room 77).

Of these 23 catalogued synagogues, only ten appear in the archaeological record. Nine of these are directly or indirectly referenced in the New Testament. Four are from Galilee, and five are from Judea. Magdala is the best example of the Galilean synagogues mentioned by the synoptic writers, and Modiin best exemplifies the Judean synagogues mentioned by John.

Herodium. King Herod the Great, client king of Rome in Judea, was infamous for his order to execute male children two years and younger as recorded in the Gospel of Matthew. Herod pursued many grand building projects, including the extravagant refurbishment of the Temple in Jerusalem. The Herodium palace fortress was completed around 15 BC and built into a mountain south of Jerusalem. The complex included novel architecture, towers, an elaborate bathhouse, garden courtyards, lavish living quarters, and a Roman theater. Herod died an agonizing death decades before the First Jewish War, or Great Revolt, of 66 AD when the complex was overrun. The Romans re-captured Herodium in 71 AD. However, during the Bar-Kokhba Revolt some sixty years later, Herodium was taken over by Jewish rebels once again. The dining hall had been converted into a prayer hall (red arrow) with stone benches installed against the wall. The columns were probably free-standing since they are too far apart to support a roof structure. Considered one of the oldest synagogues in the Levant, it falls into the Stripling typology category IIC.



Abraham Graicer/synagogues.kinnert.ac.il



Leen Ritmeyer



Leen Ritmeyer

Left: The Capernaum Synagogue in Jesus' day.

Above: The fourth century AD limestone synagogue was built

right on top of the visible black basalt (volcanic rock) stones of the first century synagogue. Excavations in 1981 revealed the walls and a floor. In the Byzantine period the white synagogue would have stood out dramatically from the surrounding black basalt buildings. But in Jesus' time, the Capernaum synagogue blended into its setting.

First-Century Synagogues in Galilee

Capernaum

The New Testament mentions the Capernaum synagogue nineteen times, far more than any other synagogue. Through these references, we learn that Jesus established the headquarters for his Galilean ministry at Capernaum, and according to Mark 4:13 he lived there. We also know that a Roman centurion financed the construction of the town's synagogue in the first quarter of the first century AD (Lk 7:5), and that the name of the ruler of the synagogue was Jairus (Mk 5:22). Jesus exorcised a demon from a man in the Capernaum synagogue (Lk 4:33–35).

Modern visitors to Capernaum visit the restored fifth-century AD synagogue. This beautiful, limestone edifice (Stripling Type IIIB) is constructed entirely from white limestone and sits on a basalt foundation from the first-century AD synagogue. Although the foundation is neither level nor square, Byzantine-era Jews opted to compensate for the imperfections rather than to remove them. This indicates a possible veneration for the spot. After Edward Robinson identified the ruins of the Capernaum synagogue in 1838, looters absconded with much of the ornamental stone. The Franciscans purchased the property to prevent further damage. From 1921 to 1926, Father Gaudentius Orfali excavated and restored the structure, which he incorrectly identified as the first-century synagogue portrayed so prominently in the gospels.

Virgilio Corbo and Stanislao Loffreda led a second Franciscan excavation at Capernaum from 1968 to 1981. Beneath the fifth-century AD synagogue, they revealed extensive remains of the synagogue of Jesus' day. Many of the walls survived to a height of 3 ft (1 m). The exterior or retaining wall of the platform measured 4 ft (1.2 m) thick, indicating that it was likely a monumental building rather than a residence. Pottery and coins embedded in the cobbled basalt pavement enabled the excavators to date these remains to the first century AD. This synagogue dwarfs other known synagogues from the time of Jesus. It measures 79.4 × 60.7 ft (24.2 × 18.5 sq m) and covers 4820 sq ft (448 sq m). According to James Strange and Hershel Shanks⁵ the closest parallel in Galilee is the Gamla synagogue, which covers 3229 sq ft (299 sq m).

Chorazin

Modern tourists at Chorazin visit a well-restored, fourth-century synagogue (Stripling Type IIIB) that was first excavated in 1905 by Heinrich Kohl and Carl Watzinger. Na'im Makhoul and Jacob Ory conducted further excavations in 1926. Ory reported a second synagogue about 656 ft (200 m) west of the fourth-century synagogue. He described it as a small, square structure with seven columns and benches with five courses. Three of the courses were *in situ*. He identified the entrance in the eastern wall. Subsequent surveys of the Chorazin ruins have failed to locate this synagogue, which likely dates to the late Second Temple period. Marilyn Chiat⁶ notes that the material remains of the village point to a second century AD date. Perhaps the first-century AD remains lie to the west where Ory described the older synagogue. Matthew 11:20 implies that Jesus performed miracles at Chorazin, and several passages claim that he preached in all the synagogues of Galilee. No reason exists to doubt the veracity of these verses. It seems plausible that Ory's western synagogue served Chorazin's residents during New Testament times. Hopefully future excavations will relocate this lost synagogue.

Gamla

Residents of the villages surrounding the Sea of Galilee could see the lights of Gamla to the northeast in the modern Golan Heights. Shmarya Guttman, who excavated Gamla from 1976 to 1989, dated construction of the synagogue to the Herodian period (late first century BC). The structure's interior measures 76.5 × 51 ft (19.7 × 15.3 m) and is the best-preserved synagogue from the New Testament period. It orients southwest and abuts the eastern fortification wall. Five courses of benches lined the hall's interior, and a combination of Doric and Ionic columns supported its roof. The roof channeled rainfall into a plastered *mikveh* in a connecting room. This ritual bath facilitated halakhic purity for the community. A rosette and two date palms decorated the lintel. The builders of the synagogue exclusively used the local basalt stone, even for the untiled floor.

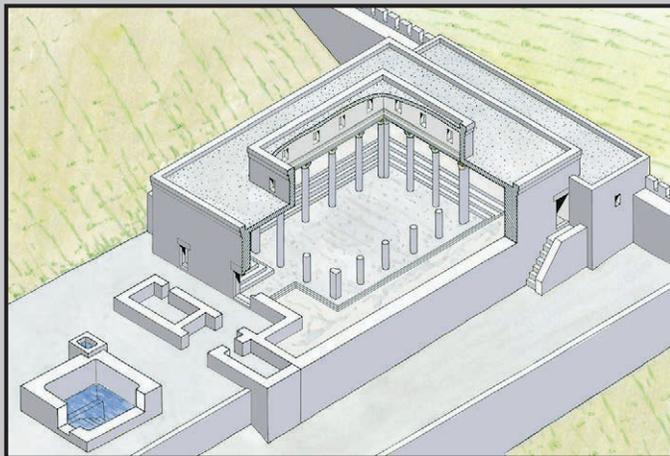
The Romans destroyed Gamla in AD 67, in the first year of the Great Revolt. Josephus vividly describes the resistance and ultimate capitulation of the Jewish resistance forces (*War* 4.17–83). Gamla lies in Gaulanitis, outside the boundaries of Galilee, so we cannot be certain that Jesus ministered here, but it is certainly possible. Gamla falls within the Decapolis, a region where Jesus healed the sick and cast out demons (Mk 5–7).

Upper Right: The Chorazin, or Korazin, fourth century synagogue. Chorazin, Capernaum and Bethsaida were places cursed by Jesus because they would not repent (Mt 11:21, Lk 10:13). The Bible tells us that Jesus performed great works at Chorazin and that he preached in *all* the synagogues of Galilee. But the remains of the synagogue visible today were built in the third century and restored much later. The earliest archaeological findings in Chorazin show second century village occupation. In 1926, Jacob Ory identified and provided details of the remains of a much older synagogue which subsequent surveys could not locate. Only a small portion of the ancient settlement has been excavated so, for now, the village of Jesus' time remains hidden.



Right: Seat of Moses (replica). Discovered in the ruins of the Chorazin fourth century synagogue, the stone seat illuminates the passage in Mt 23:2–3. It was a chair in which the rabbi and leaders would read from the Torah scrolls, teach, and pass judgments. All synagogues had such a place and when Jesus taught in the synagogues of Galilee it is likely he would sit in the seat reserved for such authority.

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Reconstruction of the Gamla synagogue.

Leen Ritmeyer

The typical design of early synagogues was a rectangular structure with benches along the walls and columns for supporting the roof and as free-standing pillars. The amount of decoration and adornment depended upon the wealth and size of the local population. Herodium (see page 8) is interesting in that the Jewish rebels converted a banquet hall with benches along the wall and columns that were not structurally necessary and may have had a purely decorative purpose. This indicates that as early as the First Revolt, the Jewish population already had a tradition of how their synagogues were supposed to look.

Below Left: A reconstruction of a Roman ballista used to breach walls and destroy structures. It is essentially a giant crossbow using torsion to propel stones several hundred meters.



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Below Right: The breach in the Gamla walls.



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The once fortified village of Gamla in the Golan Heights. The synagogue (red arrow) was built inside the walls and dated to the Herodian period. The settlement was founded in the first century BC and further populated with relocated Jews by Herod the Great. It's easy to see why it was called Gamla, Aramaic for camel, due to its resemblance of a camel's hump. It became a stronghold for Jewish refugees during the Great Revolt of 66 AD but the occupants ultimately could not hold off soldiers commanded by the Roman general Vespasian. According to Josephus, the inhabitants were either slaughtered outright or were trampled and fell to their death as the throngs attempted to escape down the steep northern slope. Charred wood fragments along with Roman arrowheads and catapult balls were discovered inside the synagogue. After the Romans swept through and destroyed Gamla, it was abandoned and never rebuilt.



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Gamla is the best preserved synagogue from the first century. What happened here was an example of the extreme measures that the Roman Empire was willing to go to in order to eliminate resistance.

Of course, putting down the First Jewish Revolt and destroying the Temple and Jerusalem in 70 AD did not end the violence. Clashes during the Bar-Kokhba Revolt, or Third Jewish-Roman War, during the reign of Emperor Hadrian in 132–136 AD was devastating for the Jewish communities. They were dramatically depopulated by massacres and famine as Hadrian hit hard with a campaign to root out Jewish identity.

Magdala

In 2009 Mexican archaeologist Marcela Zapata-Meza, in cooperation with Dina Avshalom-Gorni and Arfan Jajar of the Israel Antiquities Authority, exposed a synagogue at Magdala where Jesus certainly preached (Mt 4:23). Local residents built it late in the first century BC. Magdala, the likely hometown of Mary Magdalene, a close follower of Jesus (Jn 20:1), rested on the Sea of Galilee's northwest shore between Capernaum and Tiberias. Unlike Capernaum, Magdala was several hundred meters from the water. While smaller than the Gamla synagogue, measuring 36 × 36 ft (11 × 11 m) the Magdala synagogue followed a similar floorplan. Some of the stones were basalt, and others were limestone. Patches of surviving fresco on columns and walls and a well-preserved mosaic floor (no parallels exist on Stripling Type IIB1 synagogues) suggest a beautifully adorned structure in which the community took great pride.

Right: The Magdala Stone was uncovered in the middle area of the synagogue (red arrow). It is a remarkable discovery depicting the oldest representation of a menorah ever found. The appearance of the various motifs on the stone indicates a partnership, rather than a competition, with Jerusalem, and is essentially a three-dimensional model of the most sacred elements of the Temple.

Below Left: Fresco is the durable method of painting fresh stucco so the pigment becomes set into the plaster. The Magdala synagogue was well-decorated with colorful and elaborately frescoed walls and columns as well as mosaic flooring. A coin minted in Tiberias in 29 AD was discovered in one of the side rooms, offering further evidence of first century use.

Below Right: Top view of the Magdala Stone with the rosette and heart motif that is repeated in the mosaic floor design. This rosette design was also carved on a lintel stone at Gamla.

In the center of the synagogue archaeologists found a finely worked rectangular stone with inscribed artistic motifs, including a rosette (like Gamla), and a menorah flanked by amphorae. The rosette was the most common first century image; however, the menorah image is very rare prior to AD 70. This indicates a partnership, not competition, with the temple in Jerusalem. The amphorae assist ceramic typologists in identifying such vessels from the time of Jesus. Four *mikvaot*, filled by a perpetual spring, lie within the village's residential district. Along with the Sea of Galilee, these installations helped residents achieve ritual purity prior to entering the synagogue. While the Israel Antiquities Authority restored the synagogue's entrance on the west, Zapata-Meza believes that it belongs on the south.



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Courtesy Magdala Center, Migdal, Israel

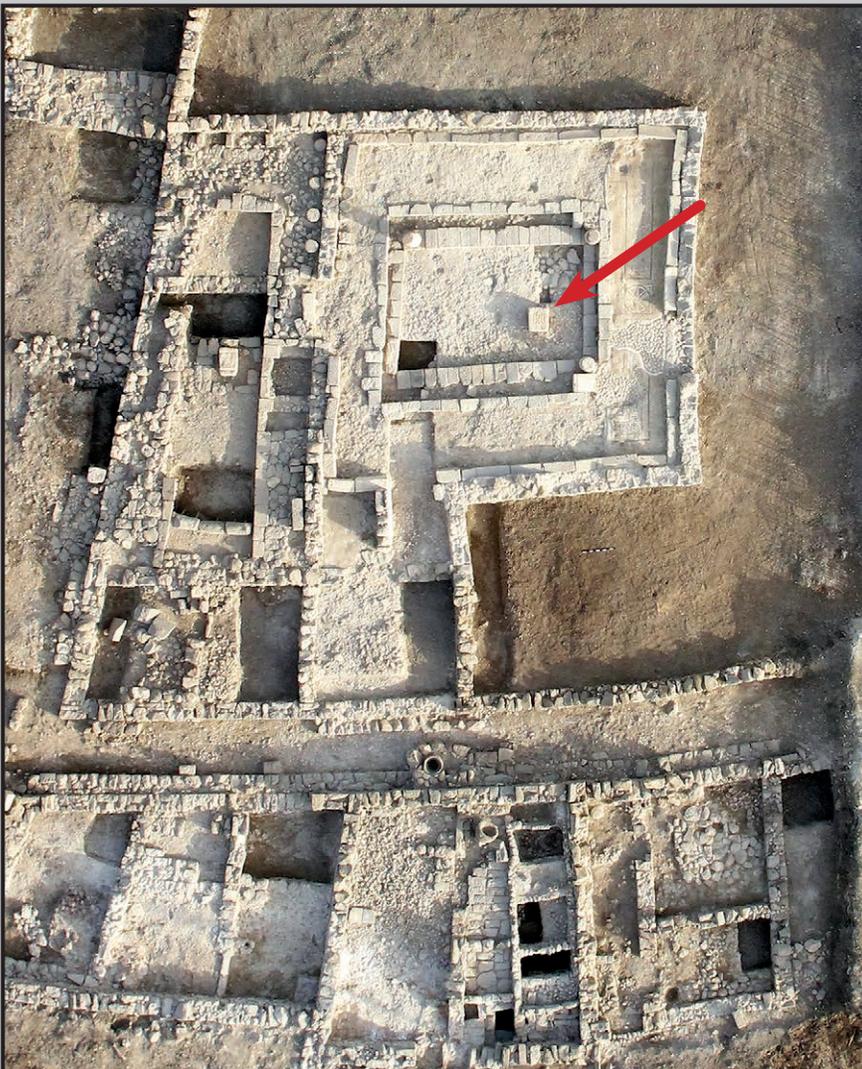


Courtesy Magdala Center, Migdal, Israel



Israel Antiquities Authority

Above: The mosaicked floor of the Magdala synagogue. In 2009 archaeologists conducting a dig prior to new construction of a Christian retreat and pilgrimage center discovered the well-preserved ruins of this first century synagogue. The modern city of Migdal was known to be the traditional site of biblical Magdala, a city established during the Hellenistic period. But the ancient ruins of Mary Magdalene's hometown remained buried and forgotten for two thousand years under the mud of regional floods and layers of time.



© 2013 David Silverman and Yuval Nadel, courtesy Magdala Center

Until the establishment of the city of Tiberias in 20 AD, Magdala was the only urban center on the West Bank of the Sea of Galilee. According to Christian tradition, the tower of Miriam is covered in the city of Magdala in the area of the synagogue.

Along with the synagogue, a once prominent city was unearthed. It had a well-designed market place and a paved main street flanked with shops. A surprisingly advanced plumbing system was also discovered which connected the shops with a fresh groundwater supply. The Bible tells us that "Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people" (Mt 4:23). He traveled by boat to this region after feeding the multitudes (Mk 8:10, Mt 15:39). Jesus most certainly would have visited this city and taught at this very spot.



Scott Stripling with Marcela Zapata-Meza and Dr. Socorro Jimenez Alvarez

First-Century Synagogues in Judea

Beth Shemesh

Massive salvage operations at Beth Shemesh in 2020 revealed the most recently discovered synagogue from the New Testament era. It has not been published yet, but according to initial reports the structure dates to the Herodian era (first century BC). The dimensions remain unknown. In order to accomplish the much-needed widening of Highway 38, the Israel Antiquities Authority plans to dismantle this synagogue and reassemble it at another location. Based on John 18:20, Jesus may have taught in this synagogue.

"If the dismantling and reconstruction of the synagogue is done properly, the work will be time-consuming. There needs to be a careful recording of the orientation of the various components of the synagogue itself, then the structure must be systematically dismantled, and reconstructed at another location that has been prepared for it. I seriously doubt it will be reconstructed by the time the summer excavation season of 2021 arrives."

Dale W. Manor, PhD

Field Director of Tel Beth-Shemesh Excavations, Israel

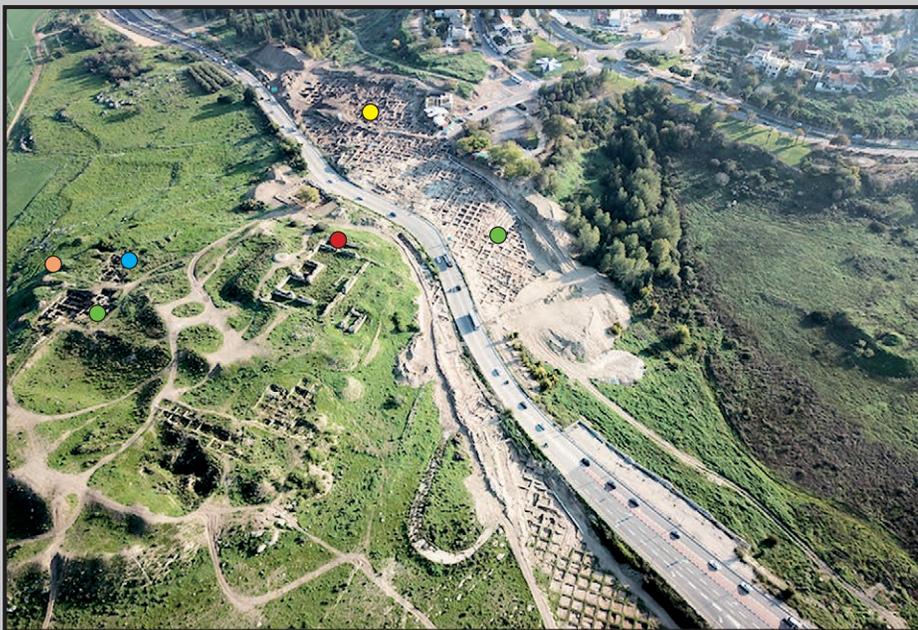
H. et-Tuwani

In 2010 Benny Har-Even excavated a synagogue in the southwest sector of H. et-Tuwani, just southwest of En Gedi. The rectangular structure measured 33 × 26 ft (10 × 8 m) and dated from the mid-first century BC through the Bar Kokhba Revolt. Remnants of stepped benches survived along the north, south, and west walls. Har-Even failed to recover columns, which looters apparently robbed from the site.

Jerusalem (Theodotus Inscription)

Five New Testament verses mention synagogues in Jerusalem. Three of these come from John's gospel (9:22, 12:42, and 16:2) and two come from Acts (6:9 and 24:12). Acts 24:12 indicates that there was more than one synagogue in Jerusalem. In fact, there were likely scores of them.

An inscription recovered by French archaeologist Raymond Weill in 1913 in the City of David (just south of the Temple Mount) documents one of these synagogues. The cistern from which Weill recovered the monumental inscription lay north of the Pool of Siloam and west of the Gihon spring. The cistern



Tag Rogosvsky

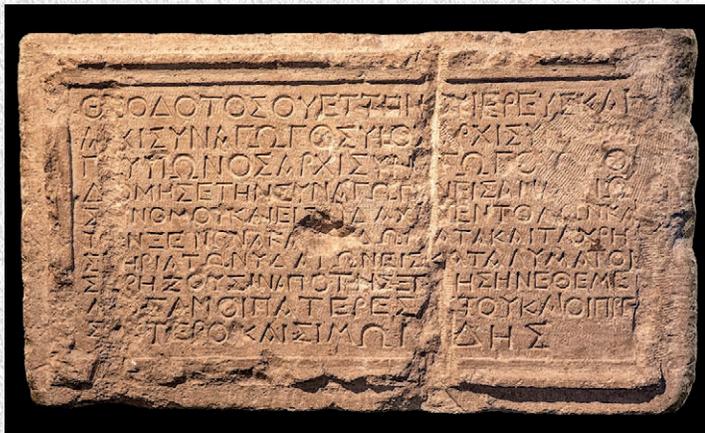
Tel Beth Shemesh on Highway 38 in the northwest edge of the modern city has seen decades of excavation. Archaeological evidence shows occupation and activity from the time of the Patriarchs all the way through the Byzantine and Ottoman eras. Moving the remains of the first century synagogue will be no easy feat. Surrounding structures may have to remain buried since the highway project has already been re-routed to accommodate other excavations. It is an ongoing challenge to preserve the past, meet the needs of the present and develop for the future.

The area of Beth Shemesh seems to have been a transportation hub for over 3,000 years. Several Roman era milestone markers have been found indicating that it was an important thoroughfare for the Empire. There was more than one place called Beth Shemesh

in the Bible since the name, "house of the sun," was apparently applied to Canaanite towns with a sun-god shrine.

The Beth Shemesh pictured here was part of the land allocated to the descendants of Aaron (Joshua 21:16) and the place where King Jehoash of Israel attacked and defeated King Amaziah of Judah (2 Kings 14). Samson hailed from the Valley of Sorek which borders Beth Shemesh to the north. He killed 1,000 Philistines with a donkey jawbone (Judges 15:16) in Lehi which is thought to be nearby to the north. Beth Shemesh is also famously the place where the Philistines, afflicted with tumors and becoming panicked, sent back the stolen ark on a cart pulled by two cows. It came to rest in a field but, unfortunately, 70 men from Beth Shemesh looked into the ark and were struck dead (1 Samuel 6:10–20).

- Area where the 1st century synagogue was recently found prior to highway expansion.
- Iron Age, 12th century BC, pagan temple.
- Late Bronze Age palace from the time of the Patriarchs.
- 1500 year old Byzantine structure decorated with marble imported from Turkey and mosaic floors featuring birds, leaves and pomegranates. It has been conjectured by some to have been a monastery or possibly an administrative center for the extensive olive oil industry that skirted the area.
- Storage rooms and olive press operations from the Hezekiah period.



Israel Museum, Jerusalem

The Theodotus Inscription, from the days of Herod, is one of the most important finds from Jerusalem. It mentions Theodotus, son of Vettanus, priest and head of a Synagogue and grandson of the head of the synagogue, built not far from the Temple. The inscription demonstrates that the institution of the synagogue existed before the destruction of the Temple. Synagogues had not yet become substitutes for the Temple and its rites, and would have therefore filled other religious and social roles.

These names are not of Hebrew or Aramaic origin. Theodotus is Greek, and Vettanus is probably Latin. Thus, they are likely Hellenistic Jews. The inscription reveals three generations of men who exercised various levels of leadership in synagogue circles. The term *archisynagogus* likely refers to the leader of the synagogue who had certain ceremonial and administrative duties such as building maintenance and governmental relations. Four New Testament verses mention synagogue leaders (Mk 5:22, Acts 13:15, Acts 18:8, 17).

We know nothing about the dimensions of this synagogue, but we can assume that it was similar to other Type II synagogues. We do know that it existed south of the Temple Mount. We also know the name of its leader and that Jesus may have taught in it, based on John 18:20. The inscription measures 29.5 × 16.1 inches (75 × 41 cms) and is on display in the Israel Museum.

Modiin

The synagogue at Hurvat Um al-Umdan, Modiin, may be the oldest one ever excavated. Its first phase, consisting of three rooms, dates to the late second century BC and the second phase to the first century BC. The second phase measures 36 × 30 ft (11 × 9.1 m). The original synagogue was slightly narrower than the later structure and contained a bema in the center of the hall. Excavations from 2000 to 2003 led by Shlomit Weksler-Bdolah and

Alexander Onn revealed a rural village with a central street flanked by residential buildings and the synagogue. Weksler-Bdolah performed further excavations in the central hall in 2013.

Stair-stepped benches lined the central hall's interior perimeter on three sides. Limestone slabs, perhaps plastered, paved the floor and supported eight large columns which supported the roof. Excavations revealed fresco fragments, indicating that the ancient synagogue, like the ones at Magdala and Qiryat Sefer, was plastered and painted. A *mikveh* to the west of the synagogue enabled worshipers to maintain ritual purity.

The Hasmonean family hailed from Modiin and may have frequented this synagogue. Perhaps some of their descendants were present when Jesus

contained large construction stones and small ornamental stones with motifs typical of synagogues; these may well have been part of the Theodotus synagogue. Associated pottery and the paleography of the inscription suggest that the synagogue's construction occurred no later than the first century BC. The mention of Theodotus' father and grandfather as synagogue leaders hint that it could be older. Its destruction likely came at the hands of the Romans in AD 70. A divided *mikveh* nearby also hints at the proximity of the synagogue.

The Theodotus inscription reads as follows:

Theodotus, son of Vettanus, a priest and an archisynagogus, grandson of an archisynagogus, built the synagogue for the reading of the Torah and for teaching the commandments; furthermore, the hostel, and the rooms, and the water installation for lodging needy strangers. Its foundation stone was laid by his ancestors, the elders, and Simonides.



synagogues.kinnert.ac.il

Synagogue at Hurvat Um al-Umdan, Modiin. Situated between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, Modiin was home of the Maccabees, a Jewish priestly family which went on to establish the Hasmonean dynasty. According to 1 Maccabees, the Hellenistic Seleucid ruler Antiochus IV forbade Jewish religious practice and a revolt against the Greek-Syrian occupation was sparked, 167–160 BC. The Jewish festival of Hanukkah celebrates the rededication of the Temple after the Maccabean victory over their oppressors.

○ Remains of upper bench ● Remains of lower bench ● Column bases ✕ Main entrance from courtyard ✕ Northern entrance



The Israeli Association of General Aviation/Wikimedia Commons

The ruins of the Qiryat Sefer synagogue are surrounded by the modern city. The village was abandoned during suppression of the First Jewish Revolt then resettled but ultimately destroyed by the Romans while suppressing the Bar-Kokhba Revolt (132–136 BC).

Conclusion

The Berenike Inscription suggests that synagogues existed from the mid-third century BC. The Modiin synagogue, dating to the second century BC, provides the earliest archaeological evidence of synagogues. A simple three-part typology enables us to classify synagogues chronologically. Those dating to the time of the New Testament, and covered in this article, fall within the Stripling Type IIB. These overwhelmingly argue against Howard Clark Kee's thesis that synagogues first appeared after AD 70 and Rachel Hachlili's contention that the archaeological evidence for synagogues in the Second Temple period is ambiguous.

Endnotes for this article can be found at www.BibleArchaeology.org. Type "Endnotes" in the search box; next, click the "Bible and Spade Bibliographies and Endnotes" link; then page down to the article.



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synagogues.kinnert.ac.il

ministered there (Jn 18:20). The structure suffered a violent destruction, likely during the Bar Kokhba Revolt (AD 132–136). Tourists can visit this important synagogue and the remains of the village free of charge.

Qiryat Sefer

Excavations in the 1990s led by Yitzhak Magen, about 2.5 mi (4 km) northeast of Modiin, revealed the ruins of a small Jewish village from the late Second Temple period. The ancient name remains a mystery, but the modern name is Qiryat Sefer. A small, square synagogue measured 29 × 29 ft (8.8 × 8.8 m) and served this rural community from the late first century BC or early first century AD, possibly to the Bar Kokhba Revolt. Stone benches lined the eastern and western walls but were missing from the southern wall. The synagogue's façade faced north. An inscribed rosette decorated the lintel, like the Gamla lintel. Ashlar-style construction characterized the building, and four free standing columns with fresco patches and Doric capitals, along with several engaged columns, supported the roof. Large flagstone slabs paved the floor. Numerous fresco fragments suggest that the entire building was plastered and painted. An adjoining room to the west may have served as sacred storage space.

Several residences and an olive press surrounded the synagogue. Each courtyard-style residence had its own *mikveh*, which may explain why a public synagogue *mikveh* was not needed.