

Going to the Synagogue with Yeshua

By Jim Myers

Yeshua 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. (Luke 4:16-17)

The fact that many of the accounts about Yeshua recorded in the Synoptic Gospels were originally meant for Jewish readers becomes very clear as you learn more about the Late Second Temple Period and Jewish culture of the first century CE. What the biblical text says is very important, but for non-Jewish readers to fully grasp what is taking place, it is often more important to learn what the text doesn't say. The reason the authors left those things out is that their intended audience clearly understood them and therefore there was no need to repeat them.

When a Jewish audience heard the words *went into the synagogue on Shabbat as was his custom*, they understood that the *Shabbat*, *synagogue*, *parasha* (Torah portion) and *haftarah* were very important to Yeshua. Let's review what those things meant to Yeshua.

- (1) **Shabbat** is often translated *Sabbath* in English Bibles. *It begins at sundown on Friday and ends at sundown on Saturday.* It is a holy day in which work is forbidden and people focused on Yahweh as they gather in synagogues to recite blessings, hear Scriptures read and listen to teachers explain what those Scriptures mean.
- (2) **synagogues** are meeting places for Jewish communities (more information below).
- (3) **parasha** are scheduled portions of the Torah that are publically read in synagogues each Shabbat.
- (4) **Torah** are the scrolls read in synagogues that contain the writings found in the books of *Genesis*, *Exodus*, *Leviticus*, *Numbers* and *Deuteronomy*.
- (5) **haftarah** -- a series of selections from the books of **Nevi'im** ("Prophets") of the Hebrew Bible (**Tanakh**) that is publicly read in the synagogue after the reading of the *parasha*. Typically, the *haftarah* is thematically linked to the *parasha* that precedes it.

Knowing this information fills in a number of things the verses above left out:

Yeshua went to his home synagogue probably on Saturday morning, recited blessings, listened to others read the scheduled parasha for that day, was given the scroll of Isaiah, found the scheduled haftarah, read it and then, as the scheduled teacher of the day, he taught.

Now let's fill in some more blanks and learn more about what Yeshua did that Shabbat. We begin by learning about Yeshua's hometown -- **Nazareth**. The population of Nazareth was about 500 people.¹ Nazareth 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,



Reconstruction of First-Century Nazareth

SOURCE²

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

As pointed out above, Yeshua went to the synagogue on Shabbat, as was his custom. It wasn't just Yeshua who had the custom of going to a synagogue every Shabbat, so did all of his followers, as well as other Jews. Why? Keeping Shabbat was the law of the land. It was written in the Torah and recorded on the stone tablets Yahweh gave Moses. *It is the Fourth 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 Yahweh 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 Yahweh made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but He rested on the seventh day. Therefore Yahweh blessed the Shabbat day and set it apart.⁴

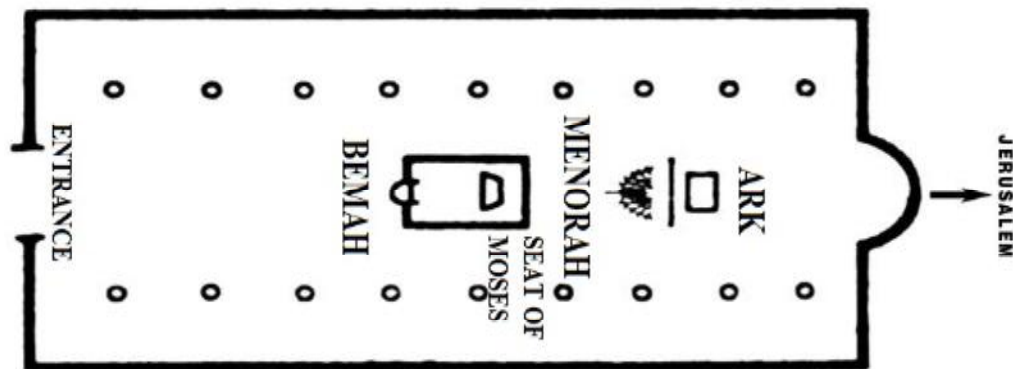
Shabbat was set apart from the other six days, which in Hebrew means it was holy. Work ceased at sundown on the sixth day (Friday) and did not begin again until after sundown on the Shabbat (Saturday). What they did on Shabbat, beside not work, was determined by the leaders at the Temple and those of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

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 ó *Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers & Deuteronomy.* Synagogues in Israel, however, were not õhouses of prayer.õ⁶ *In the land of Israel there was only one **House of Prayer** -- the Temple.*

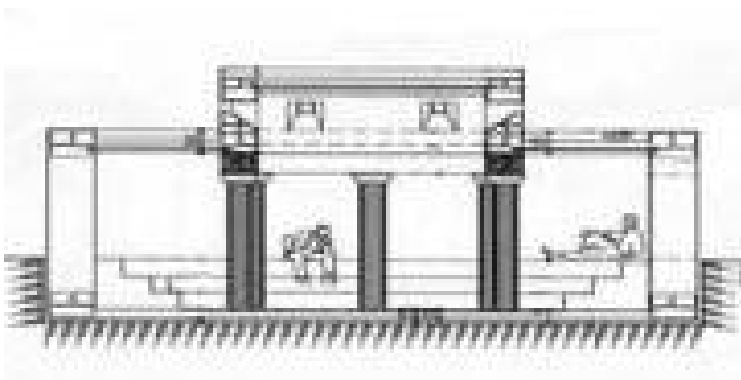
And foreigners who bind themselves to Yahweh to minister to him, to love the name of Yahweh, and to be his servants, **all who keep the Sabbath** without desecrating it and who hold fast to my covenant ô these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my **House of Prayer.** Their burnt offerings 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*. Synagogues were the center of community life and many even had places for travelers 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 Yeshua walked through the entrance he saw that people seated on benches that looked like bleachers, not in pews. There was a raised platform called a **BEMA** in the middle of the room with a **MENORAH** (a seven-branched candlestick) and an **ARK**.⁷



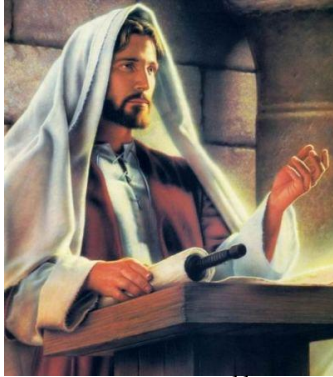
The **ARK** contained **scrolls** that were stored behind a veil and located at the place closest to Jerusalem. **The Seat of Moses**⁸ was on the raised area so everyone could see the teacher. Yeshua mentioned that seat when he taught: "*The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat: All therefore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



The Seat of Moses

One of the first people he would have encountered when he entered the synagogue was the **HAZZAN** (ruler of the synagogue). After greeting Yeshua he would have asked Yeshua if he would be the *Sheliach Tzibbur* (the representative of the people) for the day. 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 Yeshua read from Isaiah that day, we now know that he was also the *Sheliach Tzibbur* that day. Yeshua would have probably set next to members of his family, who would have attended services at the same synagogue with him. People

there that day later said: “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



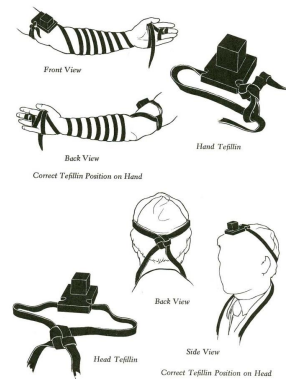
SOURCE¹¹

When it was time for the service to begin the **HAZZAN** would have walked up to the **BEMA** and introduced Yeshua as the *Sheliach Tzibbur*. The first thing Yeshua, 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 a **TALLIT**, a four-cornered garment they wore that is linked to the commandments. Every man would have been wearing one because it was one way they kept the commandment that they recited at every Shabbat service about being holy. People did not bring Bibles to the synagogue back then because they didn’t exist and most people couldn’t read. They came to hear the Scriptures

that were written on scrolls. Most people were not wealthy enough to buy a Torah scroll, so they memorized blessings, prayers and large portions of the Scriptures. Yeshua began the service by reciting the *Shema*:

Hear, Israel, Adonai is our God, Adonai is One. Blessed be the Name of His glorious kingdom for ever and ever. And you shall love Adonai 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 öbinding the commandments on their hand and between their eyesö was by the use of **TEFILLIN**. Rabbi Hayim Halevy Donin explains how **TEFILLIN** are used: öThe **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 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.ö¹³



SOURCE¹⁴

After the *Shema* Yeshua 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 Adonai 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 Adonai'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 Adonai, your God who led you from the land of Egypt to be a God to you. I am Adonai, your God.

The garment that Yeshua used to cover his head, the **TALLIT**, had a **TZITZIT** attached each of the four corners. Every man at the synagogue that day would have been wearing one.

The diagram shows a vertical fringed cord with four double knots. The segments between knots are labeled with wrap counts: 7 wraps, 8 wraps, 11 wraps, and 13 wraps. The final double knot is labeled 'final double knot'. To the right, a pink-bordered box contains the following calculation:

$$\begin{array}{r}
 \aleph = 90 \\
 י = 10 \\
 \aleph = 90 \\
 י = 10 \\
 \aleph = 400 \\
 \hline
 600 \\
 + 8 = \text{Threads} \\
 + 5 = \text{Knots} \\
 \hline
 613
 \end{array}$$

source¹⁷

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.

*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**. After Yeshua 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 carry it to the **BEMA**, laid it down and unrolled 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 provides a clue about the date Yeshua attended the synagogue. It was the fourth Shabbat of the

month of **Heshvan** (*Cheshvan*), probably in early November. The Torah reading that day was Deuteronomy 15:7-17:13.

The **HAZZAN** would have selected at least seven individuals to read portions of it. After the final reader the **HAZZAN** would roll up the scroll and return it to the Ark. He then took out the scroll of Isaiah and carried it to the **BEMA**. He then called for **Yeshua ben Yosef** (Yeshua the son of Joseph) to come forth. Yeshua stood, walked up to the Bema:

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

This sounds very simple, but it is not like opening a book with pages on which are written chapter and verse numbers. Below is a picture of the Great Isaiah Scroll found at 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 long and 11 inches high with 54 columns of text.²² Yeshua found the section he was looking for at the 49th column, 4 lines from the bottom. He then read:

ōThe 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.ō²³
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.ō²⁴

Above we learned that the reader of the Prophets was invited to teach afterwards, so they were expecting him to now explain what the text meant and how it related to the Torah reading of the day. They were not prepared for what he said next:

ōToday this scripture has been fulfilled even as you heard it being read.ō²⁵

Luke doesn't include anything else Yeshua taught that day, but by understanding what took place in synagogues opens a treasure chest of information. We now know about how he dressed, what he did and why, when and where he went, and what he taught. All of that is interesting, but what does it have to do with people who aren't Jews?

About twenty years after Yeshua was crucified, a controversy took place concerning non-Jews who wanted to be members of the Yeshua Movement. Some of the members insisted that non-Jews must convert to Judaism and be circumcised in order to join. Others disagreed. Eventually, the apostles and elders called for a meeting in Jerusalem to resolve the issue. After hearing all sides and conferring, Jacob (James) the brother of Yeshua and leader of the movement announced their decision:

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.**²⁶

I will break their ruling down so you will be able to clearly understand the requirements for non-Jews to become members of the Yeshua Movement:

- (1) *abstain from food polluted by idols*
- (2) *abstain from sexual immorality*
- (3) *abstain from the meat of strangled animals*
- (4) *abstain from eating blood*
- (5) *keep the Shabbat*
- (6) *attend a synagogue*
- (7) *learn what the Torah teaches*

It is important to understand that Judaism today isn't the same as it was in the time of Yeshua. For the past 2000 years Christianity and Judaism have been engaged in various levels of conflict. What should followers of Yeshua do today? My suggestion is to begin by studying what Yeshua taught and doing the seventh requirement *ó study the Torah portion with its haftarah each Shabbat.*

One last comment: the haftarah sections read in synagogues today are different from those in Yeshua's period. The earliest version we have found so far, is a Triennial schedule (it takes three years to complete the Torah readings). It is found on our website. However, since we do not know which cycle applies to our calendar today, we created a compressed cycle that can be completed in one year. It includes the earliest haftarah selections for each Torah portion. I hope to have it online soon.

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 *To Be a Jew*, Rabbi Hayim Halevy Donin; p. 145
¹⁴ <http://emp.byui.edu/SATTERFIELD/tefillin/phyllacteries.htm>
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://rabbielimallon.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/qum-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 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 Yeshua' synagogue
opened a treasure chest of important information!**

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