



**VIEW NORTHEAST:** MAP SHOWING THE LOCATIONS OF THE SYNAGOGUES REVIEWED IN THIS CHAPTER. SEE ALSO "MAGDALA" ON PAGE 211 AND "CAPERNAUM" ON PAGE 235.

**BELOW (VIEW NORTHEAST):** DETAIL OF THE WHITE FOURTH-CENTURY SYNAGOGUE OF CAPERNAUM. THIS IS THE MAIN HALL WITH SEATING ON EITHER SIDE. SEE "CAPERNAUM" ON PAGE 235.





**VIEW NORTHWEST:** THE GROUNDS OF WESTERN CAPERNAUM. IN THE FOREGROUND ARE THE RUINS OF THE ROMAN-PERIOD TOWN. ABOVE THE RUINS ARE THREE STRUCTURES: (1) CAPERNAUM'S FOURTH-CENTURY SYNAGOGUE (CENTER RIGHT), (2) THE MODERN MEMORIAL BUILDING BUILT OVER THE HOUSE OF ST. PETER (CENTER LEFT), AND (3) THE FRANCISCAN MONASTERY (TOP LEFT). FOR MORE ON THE SYNAGOGUE, SEE "CAPERNAUM" ON PAGE 235.

## 4

# ANCIENT SYNAGOGUES

Synagogues were community buildings where Jesus read and discussed passages from the Tanach (Old Testament), often applying them to Himself (see Luke 4:16–30). Since the synagogue figures prominently in all four gospel accounts, the following points seem important to better understand the world in which Jesus taught and ministered.

### SYNAGOGUES BEFORE 70 AD

The Second Temple, also known as Herod's Temple, was destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD. The synagogue played a different role in Judaism before and after the temple's destruction. Its role before the destruction was as follows:

- Synagogues were places where people gathered to listen and discuss both religious and community affairs.
- Public synagogues were owned by the community and functioned as political and religious institutions. As political institutions, they resembled town halls of today. The synagogue of Nazareth was a public synagogue (see Luke 4:16–30, cf. Mark 6:1–6).
- The first-century synagogue found at Magdala was decorated with multicolored wall frescoes, red

painted columns, and floors paved with mosaics. The colorful decorations and mosaics suggest that synagogues were places where people would meet for lively discussions on any topic.

- A second synagogue was discovered at Magdala in December 2021, which may indicate that larger towns built multiple synagogues to accommodate the needs of the community.
- Synagogues have been found in small rural villages, showing how important they were to Jewish community life regardless of population size. Their construction in the center of the village emphasized their importance to the community.

Wheaton College professor Jordan Ryan summarizes how synagogues were used in New Testament times:

Synagogues in the Gospels are generally depicted as gathering places belonging to local communities where Jesus could interact with the assembled people. By taking part in synagogue gatherings, Jesus was engaging with the common Judaism practiced in the early Roman period. By participating in synagogues, Jesus was involved in normal, public Jewish life. The public reading of the Torah and other Jewish scripture in synagogues is widely attested by the Jewish historian Josephus, Jewish philosopher Philo, the New Testament, and early rabbinic literature.<sup>1</sup>

Ryan’s summary fits nicely with New Testament accounts of Jesus in Galilee, using synagogues to proclaim the gospel message followed by discussion and debate.

The 28-by-17-inch (72-by-42-centimeter) Theodotus Inscription was discovered in 1913 in a cistern in the City of David south of the Temple Mount (Old City of Jerusalem). The inscription, written in Greek, states that its synagogue was built “for reading of the law and teaching of the commandments.”



THE THEODOTUS INSCRIPTION IS ON DISPLAY IN THE ISRAEL MUSEUM (JERUSALEM).

The style of the inscription suggests the synagogue was built before the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, making it contemporary with Herod’s Temple.

Because the inscription was written in Greek, some people associate it with the “synagogue of the Libertines [Freedmen in Greek], and Cyrenians, and Alexandrians, and of them of Cilicia and of Asia” (see Acts 6:9). Consider the following additional details about the inscription:

- Theodotus was a Greek-speaking Jew who had the title “presiding officer [or ruler] of the synagogue”—a title used several times in the New Testament (see Mark 5:35–36; Luke 8:49, 13:14; Acts 13:15, 18:8, 17). Because his father and grandfather had held the same title, it’s thought that the leadership of the synagogue was hereditary.
- The guest chamber, upper rooms, and ritual pools of water mentioned in the inscription indicate that Theodotus provided accommodations for Jews visiting Jerusalem from abroad (cf. Acts 6:1), especially during festival times (cf. Acts 2:5).

- As mentioned above, the synagogue was “for reading of the law and teaching of the commandments.” Thus synagogues in New Testament times were centers for teaching, learning, discussing, and debating the Torah, or Jewish law (see Mark 6:1–6).

## JEWISH SYNAGOGUES IN NORTHERN ISRAEL

I’ve highlighted six synagogues in this section. They include four third-to-sixth-century synagogues, Ein Keshatot, Kefar Baram, Katzrin, and Arbel, and two first-century synagogues, Gamla and Magdala. All are located in either Upper Galilee or the Golan. The synagogues at Magdala, Capernaum, and Chorazin are also presented with additional photos on the site’s page in this book. Of all the synagogues, the one at Ein Keshatot (see *below*) is particularly beautiful as the most complete.

Most tours of the Holy Land have time to visit only two synagogues: the white synagogue of Capernaum, which dates to the fourth century AD (see photo on page 31) and the first-century synagogue discovered at Magdala (see *below* and “Magdala” on page 211). Both synagogues are located in places where Jesus spent much of His ministry performing miracles and instructing the people in gospel doctrines. The date of the synagogue is less important than its location when it comes to stories that involve Jesus and His disciples. The topography of the land is the same today as it was in Jesus’s day. Hills, valleys, lakes, and rivers are the same. The weather is the same. The seasons are the same. Forested areas are the same, although the trees are different today.<sup>2</sup> You can still see Tabor oaks in the Upper Jordan Valley (see *Blessed Pilgrimage*, vol. 2), sycamore trees (see “Jericho” in *Blessed Pilgrimage*, vol. 2), and other species of flora from biblical times in Galilee and around the country.

Discovering the natural beauty of the Holy Land is more important than standing on the exact spot where Jesus stood, which in most cases is impossible to determine. When it comes to biblical stories involving Jesus, knowing the physical setting of an area He visited can enhance your involvement with the story and provide a sweet memory of the experience (see chapter 3, “Experience to Learn”).

For example, when you read the “Bread of Life” sermon in Capernaum where Jesus gave it (see John 6), whether you’re standing in a fourth-century AD synagogue or one from the first century matters little. Looking up, you’ll see the same hills and lake that Jesus saw when He gave the sermon. It’s enough to walk where Jesus walked and to stand in the areas where He stood and delivered His gospel message. What you really want is to feel His presence and the message of His life and doctrine wherever you are. It’s a presence and message you can get anywhere, but uniquely so in the Holy Land.

### EIN KESHATOT SYNAGOGUE

It took fifteen years and modern technology to reconstruct the synagogue at Ein Keshatot, which means “spring of the arches” in Hebrew. The Arabic name, Um El-Kanatir, means “the mother of arches.” Both names come from the natural springs located a short distance south of the synagogue.

The synagogue measures 59 feet (18 meters) by 43 feet (13 meters) and is calculated to have been 39 feet (12 meters) tall. It was built in the fifth century AD, embellished in the sixth century AD, and finally destroyed in the Golan earthquake of 749 AD.

The front of the synagogue is pictured on page 34 (top photo), facing south toward Jerusalem, as was the case with most synagogues. The excavators used computer technology to reconstruct the synagogue after



**VIEW SOUTHWEST:** THE “SPRING OF THE ARCHES” AT EIN KESHATOT.



**VIEW NORTH:** THE MAIN ENTRANCE OF THE SIXTH-CENTURY AD EIN KESHATOT SYNAGOGUE. IT FACES SOUTH, TOWARD JERUSALEM.

digitally recording and labeling the stones. A special crane was used to lift and place the stones in proper sequence. It was a highly successful technological achievement. The evidence is in the reconstruction of the synagogue as it stood anciently.

The Torah Shrine pictured *below* was the most important architectural feature of the synagogue after the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD. This was true in Israel and the diaspora. The shrine itself contained an ark with Torah scrolls inside. The ark, normally made of wood, was placed on top of a stone base. The hall of the synagogue was lined with columns and side aisles that focused on the Torah Shrine.

**BELOW (VIEW SOUTH):** THE TORAH SHRINE LOCATED AT THE SOUTHERN END OF THE SYNAGOGUE TO THE RIGHT OF THE MAIN ENTRANCE, WHICH FACES JERUSALEM.





**VIEW NORTHEAST:** IN RELATION TO THE SURROUNDING AREA, THE SYNAGOGUE IS LOCATED ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE TREES BELOW THE SUNLIT AREA (UPPER RIGHT).

**BELOW (VIEW WEST):** THE TORAH SHRINE OF EIN KESHATOT (LEFT) WITH THE WESTERN ENTRANCE TO THE SYNAGOGUE (CENTER). THE COLUMNS SUPPORTED A SECOND STORY IN ANTIQUITY.





MENORAH, SHOFAR (RAM'S HORN), AND INCENSE SHOVEL.



GRAPEVINE GROWING OUT OF AN AMPHORA. GRAPES ARE ASSOCIATED WITH ABUNDANCE (SEE NUM. 13:23).

INCENSE SHOVEL, MENORAH, LULAV (RITUAL PALM BRANCH), AND ETROG (CITRUS FRUIT).

**BELOW:** THE VULTURE IS A WELL-KNOWN JEWISH ART MOTIF IN THE GALILEE AND GOLAN REGIONS. ALTHOUGH THE BIBLE FORBIDS EATING VULTURES (LEV. 11:13, DEUT. 14:12), THEY ARE ASSOCIATED SYMBOLICALLY WITH PURIFICATION.





**VIEW WEST:** THE TRAIL LEADING DOWN TO NAHAL SAMACH AND THE SEA OF GALILEE (TOP CENTER) FROM EIN KESHATOT AND THE GOLAN HEIGHTS. ALSO VISIBLE IS GERGESA (KURSI) ON THE SHORE OF THE LAKE (TOP CENTER).

**BELOW (VIEW NORTHEAST):** NAHAL SAMACH NORTH OF EIN KESHATOT AND THE PLATEAU. THE ROAD (CENTER) LEADS DOWN NAHAL SAMACH TO GERGESA (KURSI). SEE THE MAP ON PAGE 30 AND PHOTO ABOVE.







**VIEW NORTHWEST:** THE THREE-PORTAL ENTRANCE TO THE THIRD-CENTURY KEFAR BARAM SYNAGOGUE. IT WAS LIKELY DAMAGED IN THE GALILEE EARTHQUAKE OF 1837. SEE “KEFAR BARAM” ON PAGE 65.

The photos on page 36 detail decorations used in the Torah Shrine of Ein Keshatot, which are commonly found in Talmudic Period synagogues (70–640 AD).

## KEFAR BARAM SYNAGOGUE

The third-century ruins of Kefar Baram were identified as a synagogue in 1852 by Edward Robinson, who described what remained of the ruins:

The front wall is of stones hewn smooth; some of them of considerable size. In the middle is a portal [entrance] of good size and proportions; with sculptured side posts and lintel; the latter having in its middle a wreath. Over this is a cornice [horizontal molding]; and then a well formed round arch ornamented with a sort of wreath around it. On each side of this portal is a smaller side door; each with a cornice of different sculpture. Above each of these side doors is a smaller window, capped with an ornamented stone.

Robinson also described what finding synagogue ruins in Galilee and on the Golan meant to him and his companions:

As these remains were the first of the kind that we had yet seen; and were of a style of architecture utterly unknown to us; we were at a loss for some time what to make of them. They were evidently neither Greek nor Roman. The [Hebrew] inscription [that “invoked peace upon the founder of the edifice”], if authentic, obviously marks both structures as of Jewish origin; and as such, they could only have been synagogues. We were, however, not satisfied on this point until we found at Meiron the same species of architecture, in the acknowledged remains of an ancient Jewish synagogue. We afterwards found the ruins of like structures at Irbid [Arbel, northwest of Tiberias], Tell Hum [Capernaum], Kedes [Kedesh of



**VIEW NORTHEAST:** THE LINTEL AND WREATH CARVING ABOVE THE SYNAGOGUE'S CENTER PORTAL (SEE THE PHOTO ON PAGE 38). ON THE TOP OF THE LINTEL ARE GRAPEVINES AND CLUSTERS WITH TWO WINGED FIGURES ON THE SIDES.

Naphtali in Upper Galilee], and perhaps other places in Galilee; all marked with the same architectural peculiarities. The size, the elaborate sculptured ornament, and the splendor of these edifices, do not belong to a scattered and down-trodden people; such as the Jews have been in these regions ever since the fourth century. These costly synagogues, therefore, can be referred only to the earlier centuries of the Christian era; when Galilee was the chief seat of the Jews; and Jewish learning and schools flourished at Tiberias. All these circumstances would seem to mark a condition of prosperity and wealth and influence among the Jews of Galilee in that age, of which neither their own historians, nor any other, have given us any account.<sup>3</sup>

After Robinson visited Kefar Baram in 1852, an inscription was deciphered under the right window of the facade that identified the builder: “Elazar bar Yodan built it.”

See “Kefar Baram” on page 65 for additional photos of the synagogue, a Maronite Church, and the surrounding region.

## **GAMLA SYNAGOGUE**

The Gamla synagogue dates to the first century AD, making it one of the oldest in the world (see the top photo on page 40 and “Synagogue of Gamla” on page 280). Josephus fortified Gamla in 66 AD while he was commander of Galilee during the Jewish Revolt against Rome, before he turned historian. In his writings, he provides a detailed topographical description of the site (see “Gamla” on page 275).

A vestibule with a three-part entrance leads into the main hall of the Gamla synagogue. Benches line the walls, leaving wide passages behind them. The columns supporting the roof were placed on paving stones because the floor itself was unpaved (see an artist’s rendering on page 281).

The synagogue is 10 miles from Capernaum and is similar to ones Jesus knew as He “went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the gospel” (Matt. 4:23).



**VIEW EAST:** THE FIRST-CENTURY AD SYNAGOGUE OF GAMLA. SEE "GAMLA" ON PAGE 275 FOR PHOTOS OF THE SURROUNDING AREA AND MORE OF THE SYNAGOGUE ON PAGE 280.

**BELOW (VIEW NORTH):** INSIDE THE SYNAGOGUE OF KATZRIN WITH TWO ROWS OF COLUMNS THAT SUPPORTED THE BALCONY ON THE SECOND FLOOR.





**VIEW SOUTH:** THE ENTRANCE TO THE TALMUDIC SYNAGOGUE OF KATZRIN. FOR MORE PHOTOS OF THE SYNAGOGUE AND THE TALMUDIC VILLAGE OF KATZRIN, SEE "KATZRIN PARK" IN *BLESSED PILGRIMAGE*, VOL. 2).

## KATZRIN SYNAGOGUE

The Katzrin synagogue was discovered in 1967 and excavated between 1971 and 1984. The Jewish village surrounding the synagogue flourished during the Talmudic period from the fourth to eighth centuries AD.

Two rows of four columns each divided the synagogue into its main area flanked by an aisle on each side. The synagogue was two stories high with an inner balcony on the second floor. Against the southern wall, stone steps led to a solid platform where a wooden Torah ark or shrine probably stood. The bottom photo on page 40 looks inside the synagogue from the shrine toward its entrance.

The excavated synagogue and village have become a living history site where visitors can experience the ancient past. In addition to the synagogue, you can see an olive press, winepress, and Jewish home furnished with replicas of common household tools and goods. There's also a bakery, museum, and outdoor theater at the village (see "Katzrin Park" in *Blessed Pilgrimage*, vol. 2).

**BELOW:** THIS RELIEF, FOUND IN THE HOLY ARK OF THE SYNAGOGUE OF KATZRIN, SHOWS THE STORY OF DANIEL IN THE LIONS' DEN (DANIEL 6:4). YOU WILL FIND THE RELIEF IN THE KATZRIN MUSEUM.





**VIEW NORTHWEST:** THE STUDY HALL OF THE SYNAGOGUE. THREE COLUMNS SUPPORTED THE SYNAGOGUE'S ROOF. BENCHES RAN ALONG ITS WALLS.

**BELOW:** THE MAGDALA STONE. CARVINGS ON THE STONE DEPICT THE SECOND TEMPLE BEFORE THE ROMANS DESTROYED IT IN 70 AD. THE STONE'S TEMPLE MENORAH (CENTER) IS THE EARLIEST ONE FOUND IN A SYNAGOGUE.



## MAGDALA SYNAGOGUE

This synagogue dates to the first century AD, before the destruction of the Second Temple. It is one of seven synagogues known from this period. To learn more about the town, see “Magdala” on page 211.

Worshippers entered the synagogue’s study hall through its east entrance. In the center of the hall was a large decorated stone (see the photos on page 42) described as follows:

Positioned in the center of the hall was a particularly grand stone furnishing, fashioned by an artisan, ornamented with a variety of motifs, including a Menorah in relief.

[It] has four legs. All of its five faces are decorated in relief with a variety of patterns that form a model of the Temple and the special utensils that were used in it. This stone is the only known example of its kind; none resemble it. It apparently served in the synagogue as a table, upon which the Torah Scroll was placed when read.

Outstanding among the ornaments decorating the table is a seven-branched Menorah standing on a three-legged base with a depiction of the sacrificial altar on its facade. This relief joins the small number of Menorah decorations known to scholars, the first to have been discovered in Galilee from this period. To date, this is the earliest example of a Menorah discovered in a Jewish religious building in Galilee.<sup>4</sup>

The temple depictions on the stone have led some to suggest that synagogues were more than mere assembly and study halls while the temple stood; they may have been sacred spaces in their own right. Whatever the case, they were places where the Torah and other sacred books were read, studied, and discussed. The synagogue was where early Christian missionaries went to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ.

**BELOW (VIEW NORTH):** THE EXCAVATIONS (BOTTOM CENTER) WHERE A SECOND FIRST-CENTURY AD SYNAGOGUE WAS UNCOVERED AT MAGDALA. THE PLAIN OF GENNESARET (RIGHT) AND SUNLIT SAFED (TOP RIGHT) ARE ALSO VISIBLE.





**VIEW NORTHWEST:** THE REMAINS OF THE ARBEL SYNAGOGUE'S ENTRANCE (TOP RIGHT) WITH THE HILLS OF LOWER GALILEE VISIBLE IN THE DISTANCE.

**BELOW (VIEW NORTHEAST):** THIS IS THE VIEW BELOW THE ARBEL SYNAGOGUE LOOKING TOWARD MT. NITAI (TOP LEFT) AND MT. ARBEL (TOP RIGHT), WITH THE SEA OF GALILEE (UPPER CENTER) BELOW MT. ARBEL.



## ARBEL SYNAGOGUE

The remains of this ancient synagogue are located on the northern edge of Moshav Arbel (see the map on page 176 and the photo on page 184). The synagogue dates to the fourth century AD but was destroyed in the eighth century. Its door was created from a massive outcrop of limestone, which may explain why the synagogue faces east.

It was a two-story building with three rows of columns. Three of its sides had benches. Today you see parts of the main entrance along with Corinthian and Ionic capitals scattered about the grounds. The capitals were perched on top of the columns supporting the ceiling and roof.

## SYNAGOGUES IN THE BOOK OF MORMON

Peter taught, “We believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they [the Gentiles]. . . . Simeon hath declared how God at the first did visit the Gentiles, *to take out of them a people for his name*” (Acts 15:11, 14, emphasis added). Anciently, much of God’s work was done in synagogues as the people read the words of His prophets. Peter also declared, “For Moses of old time hath in every city them that preach him, being read in the synagogues every sabbath day” (Acts 15:21).

The work of God is accomplished through the spread of His word. What was true in the Old World was true in the New among Lehi’s descendants. The last prophet in the Book of Mormon, Moroni, quoting his father, Mormon, delivered an important Book of Mormon sermon from inside a synagogue. It’s about good and evil, faith, hope, and charity. Among other things, Mormon taught:

All things which are good cometh of God; and that which is evil cometh of the devil; for the devil is an enemy unto God, and fighteth against him continually, and inviteth and enticeth to sin, and to do that which is evil continually.

But behold, that which is of God inviteth and enticeth to do good continually; wherefore, every thing which inviteth and enticeth to do good, and to love God, and to serve him, is inspired of God. (Moro. 7:12–23)

Concerning charity, he taught:

Wherefore, my beloved brethren, if ye have not charity, ye are nothing, for charity never faileth. Wherefore, cleave unto charity, which is the greatest of all, for all things must fail—

But charity is the pure love of Christ, and it endureth forever; and whoso is found possessed of it at the last day, it shall be well with him. (Moro. 7:46–47, cf. 1 Cor. 13:1–8)

## ENDNOTES

1 Jordan J. Ryan, “Jesus in the Synagogue,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 49, no. 1 (Spring 2000), <https://library.biblicalarchaeology.org/article/jesus-in-the-synagogue>.

2 The Jewish National Fund decided to grow the Aleppo pine because it grows fast in semiarid areas and doesn’t require a lot of water. They also planted eucalyptus trees around swamps and springs because they soak up a lot of water. For example, these trees were used in the 1950s to help drain Lake Hula north of the Sea of Galilee (see “Upper Jordan Valley,” in *Blessed Pilgrimage*, vol. 2).

3 Edward Robinson, *Later Biblical Researches in Palestine, and in the Adjacent Regions* (Boston: Crocker and Brewster, 1852), 70–1.

4 You will find these paragraphs on a wall sign hanging next to the synagogue.