

The Jewish People

In Jesus' day most Jews were humble labourers: shepherds like those around Bethlehem, farmers like those in the parables, fishermen like his disciples, carpenters like himself. The focus of a Jewish woman's life was the upkeep of the home and family. Jesus was a village boy whose preaching and teaching was directed mainly at fellow villagers. Larger, more cosmopolitan towns like Sepphoris, not far from Nazareth, or Tiberias, on the South shore of Galilee, get little or no mention in the Gospels.

What languages were spoken?

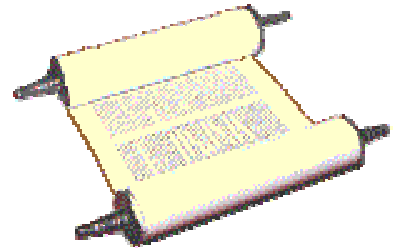
If, say in 1970s, older Catholics from the Netherlands had been asked: 'What languages do you know?' some might have said 'Dutch, some Latin and some English.' Dutch was their usual language; Latin used to be their language of worship and English was known as an international language. Broadly speaking, the same situation existed in First Century Palestine, and the three languages were **Aramaic**, **Hebrew** and a popular form of **Greek**.

- **Aramaic** – the language of the streets and homes. Abraham and his nomadic shepherds brought this language to Canaan (old name for Palestine). Jesus' original preaching was all in Aramaic.
- **Hebrew** – the language of worship. Hebrew was from the language of the Canaanite inhabitants before Israel. Ancient Israel adopted it, but then went back to Aramaic after the Babylonian exile. They kept Hebrew as the sacred language for their worship and writings.
- **Greek** – the international language, the language of trade and of the Roman occupiers.

What was important to ordinary Jews?

The Jewish religion was the focus of the devout Jew; it centred on

- the Torah (the Five Books of Moses),
- the Synagogue and
- the Temple.



What is the Torah?

If you knew nothing about Judaism and yet were invited to a synagogue service, you'd surely notice the beautiful scroll kept in a special place and brought out for reading. You'd watch carefully as the precious, embroidered cover was removed and the scroll opened to the particular reading of that Sabbath. You'd see the reader wearing a skullcap and prayer shawl go the stand. Not presuming to touch the unwound part of the sacred scroll, he would follow the Hebrew letters by means of a silver pointer. Later, you might ask how the scroll was made. Someone would tell you that it was made in the same way it always has: painstakingly copied by scribes onto parchment, meticulously checked, sewn together and wound onto two staves called 'trees of life'. If you asked what the writing was, someone would tell you the **Torah**.

Torah literally means 'teaching'. The Torah normally means the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures, also known as:

- the Law of Moses,
- the five Books of Moses,
- the Pentateuch.

The Torah was and is the core of Judaism: it speaks of God the Creator and maker of covenants, of God the Liberator and Lawgiver, of the God of justice and mercy. Moses commanded that the Law be written on the hearts of the people –hence its constant study, repetition, memorisation and application. ‘A child ought to be fattened with the Torah as an ox is fattened in the stall’ was how one old teacher put it. The Torah was meant to enter the soul like ‘spiritual DNA’.

The Torah’s influence meant that the home could also be a place of worship. Family life was led in close obedience to the Torah. This included strict rules about diet. Most Jews had only two meals a day, at midday and evening. Meat was eaten only occasionally and had to be killed in a way that drained all the blood out. This was called ‘kosher’ or ‘correct’ meat. Certain meats, like pork, were always non-kosher. It was at home that the children learned most about their Jewish tradition and practices. An important family celebration was (and is) the Friday supper (Sabbath began on Friday evening at sunset).

What is a Synagogue?

The word ‘synagogue’ is a Greek word meaning ‘assembly’ or ‘meeting’. Like the word ‘church’, the synagogue came to stand for the building as well as the people meeting there. Any village that had ten Jewish men had the requirement for a synagogue. St Mark’s Gospel tells us that it was Jesus’ habit to teach in the synagogues as he travelled from village to village in Galilee. Every synagogue had its Torah scroll; the place had larger windows so that the Torah could read in full light. Any Jewish man present could be invited to read from the scroll, as indeed Jesus was (cf. Lk 4:17).



Synagogue layout

The origin of synagogue worship is obscure. It probably goes back to the time when Jews were in exile in Babylon and found themselves cut off from the Temple. They developed a form of worship that didn’t depend on the Temple. They gathered together – ‘became synagogue’ - to read the scriptures and to pray. Upon their return from exile, synagogue worship developed and became a major influence in religious life.

Just as it is thought that synagogue worship began after the destruction of Solomon’s Temple in 586 BC so it continued after the destruction of Herod’s Temple in 70 AD. It has been the form of worship that has held the Jews together through the turbulent centuries right through to the present day.

Synagogue schools

Synagogues were places where young boys from five or six years of age would be educated in the Hebrew Scriptures - girls received no schooling outside the home. The boys would sit in a semi-circle on the floor, learn the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet and slowly be immersed in the Torah. This was the pattern for half a day, six days a week for the next five years. After this, there was advanced study. The goal was to learn as much of the Torah by heart. Talented scholars might well be recommended for training as scribes.



Modern Bar Mitzvah

A high point in a boy’s life was his *Bar Mitzvah* (Son of the Law). At this celebration the adolescent boy received his tallith (prayer shawl) and became an adult in Jewish society. On the following Sabbath he read the Law for the first time in the synagogue. It is still an important event in a Jewish boy’s life today. *Why was this important for the collection and transmission of the Gospels?*

Revision Summary

Use the diagram below to revise your knowledge and understanding of Jewish life and worship in first century Palestine.

