

Jesus, Synagogues, and the Public Reading of Scripture

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But He answered and said, “It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.’ ”

*—Matthew 4:4
(Jesus quoting Deuteronomy 8:3)*

Jesus, Synagogues, and the Public Reading of Scripture (PRS)

The Role of PRS in the Synagogue in Jesus' Life and Its Implications for Today

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Introduction

This article considers the lesser-known period of Jesus' life prior to his public ministry, specifically, the formative role of his participation in the synagogue and its associated practices. It underscores the synagogue's central significance in first-century Jewish life and its vital function in fostering communal worship through the public reading of Scripture.

Examining Jesus' synagogue practices deepens our understanding of the significance of the public reading of Scripture in his own formation. It also signals a foundational model for people who follow Jesus today.

Alongside Paul's exhortation to Timothy and the early church to devote themselves to "the public reading of Scripture" (1 Timothy 4:13), Jesus' example reinforces the enduring relevance of this practice in the life of Christian discipleship.

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The Silent Years: A Glimpse of the Formative Years of Jesus before His Public Ministry

*Jesus grew in wisdom and stature,
and in favor with God and man.*

–Luke 2:52

The period of Jesus' life preceding his public ministry remains largely undocumented.

While the Gospels provide insight into his self-understanding and mission during his ministry, they offer few details about his early, formative years. Only Luke's account relates any of Jesus's life as a boy, telling us of his family's trip to Jerusalem for the Passover festival when he was twelve years old. While there, in the intellectual and spiritual center of the temple, he engaged attentively with the teachers of his people, listening and posing questions with a wisdom that astonished all who heard (Luke 2:46b-47). Luke then offers a summary statement of his early development: "Jesus grew in wisdom and stature,

and in favor with God and man" (Luke 2:52).

The canonical Gospels do not tell us directly of anything else of his formative years before his public baptism by John. They do attest, however, to the customs that Jesus acquired by the time he was a public figure. For example, Luke tells us that "He was teaching in their synagogues... He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, *as was his custom*" (4:15-16). The synagogue and its practices constituted a prominent and essential organization of Jewish life in Jesus's day, and all four canonical Gospels present Jesus as fulfilling his calling especially in the synagogues of Galilee and Judea. Regarding Jesus's formative years, then, we can infer that he was shaped by the rhythms and practices of the synagogue, a picture that is confirmed by the available evidence of the social and religious life of the Jewish community of his time.

While synagogues came to host a number of Jewish practices, many of them aimed

The Silent Years: A Glimpse of the Formative
Years of Jesus before His Public Ministry

¹⁶ *So He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up. And as His custom was, He went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and stood up to read.* ¹⁷ *And He was handed the book of the prophet Isaiah. And when He had opened the book, He found the place where it was written:*

¹⁸ *“The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, Because He has anointed Me To preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, To proclaim liberty to the captives And recovery of sight to the blind, To set at liberty those who are oppressed;*

¹⁹ *To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.”*

—Luke 4:16-19

at education, chief among them in Jesus's generation was the public reading of the Torah as well as the Prophets of the Bible. As a devout Jew, Jesus would have been actively engaged in this Jewish practice of gathering in the synagogue regularly to listen as Scripture was read aloud at great length by trained readers. Along with other liturgy and prayer, Jesus thus continually listened to, recited, and internalized Scripture as a central pillar of his life. It was in fact a pillar of his entire Jewish community's life. It had enabled them to maintain their memory and life as a people over generations of exile among gentile peoples, domination by foreign empires, and thus the threat of extinction by assimilation. Not surprisingly, then, we find in the Gospels that by the time of his public ministry, Jesus had acquired the life-giving custom of the public reading of Scripture in the synagogue.

This formative foundation enabled Jesus to develop a deep knowledge of Scripture during the unrecorded years of his life. His consistent participation in synagogue worship—a practice

The Silent Years: A Glimpse of the Formative Years of Jesus before His Public Ministry

integrated into his weekly routine rather than limited to occasional visits—reflects a sustained commitment. Through these regular acts of worship centered on listening to Scripture, Jesus cultivated the spiritual and intellectual groundwork for his future mission.

Because Jesus was fully divine and fully human, we must ask how, in his humanity, he came to know God and His word. Did his divinity grant him innate understanding, or did he engage in human learning processes to acquire such knowledge?

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The concern of this question here is not to enter into theological speculation but to highlight the significance of Jesus' human engagement with God's word. Although interpretations vary, examining devout Jewish life during Jesus' time offers insight into

the habits of his life. In particular, his regular participation in synagogue worship provides a concrete context for understanding how he developed his sense of calling, mission, and work.

The Significance of Synagogues in the Early 1st Century AD

The origins and early development of synagogues in Jewish society remain topics of scholarly debate, though historians generally affirm their early presence. A common theme in these discussions is the recognition of Moses' role in instituting communal worship practices. According to tradition, Moses, following divine instruction, summoned the Hebrew people to assemble at regular intervals to listen to the reading of God's law.

The scriptural foundation for recording and publicly reading God's word is first established in Exodus. In Exodus 17:14, God instructs Moses to document His words on a scroll "as something to be remembered, and to ensure that Joshua

hears it.” This command is reaffirmed in Exodus 24:4-7, where Moses records the words and reads them aloud to the people. The practice is further emphasized in Exodus 34:27, where God directs Moses, “Write down these words, for in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel.” The repetition of these commands underscores their foundational importance.

¹² Gather the people together, men and women and little ones, and the stranger who is within your gates, that they may hear and that they may learn to fear the Lord your God and carefully observe all the words of this law, ¹³ and that their children, who have not known it, may hear and learn to fear the Lord your God as long as you live in the land which you cross the Jordan to possess.”
—Deuteronomy 31:12-13

In his final address, delivered through a series of sermons, Moses once again emphasized the importance of hearing the law (Deuteronomy 31:12-13). He instructed the leaders to assemble all members of the community—men, women, children, and resident aliens—

Then the Lord said to Moses, “Write this for a memorial in the book and recount it in the hearing of Joshua, that I will utterly blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven.”

–Exodus 17:14

⁴ And Moses wrote all the words of the Lord. And he rose early in the morning, and built an altar at the foot of the mountain, and twelve pillars according to the twelve tribes of Israel.

⁵ Then he sent young men of the children of Israel, who offered burnt offerings and sacrificed peace offerings of oxen to the Lord.

⁶ And Moses took half the blood and put it in basins, and half the blood he sprinkled on the altar. ⁷ Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read in the hearing of the people. And they said, “All that the Lord has said we will do, and be obedient.”

–Exodus 24:4-7

so they might listen, learn to fear the Lord, and observe His commands. This communal gathering ensured that even those unfamiliar with God's law, especially children, would be introduced to a life of reverence and obedience as they prepared to enter the promised land. And it was to be a practice that formed the generations that followed.

Joshua then followed Moses' specific instructions: "Joshua faithfully carried out Moses' instructions by reading aloud every word of the Law—both blessings and curses—as recorded in the Book of the Law. He ensured that all Moses had commanded was proclaimed to the entire assembly of Israel, including women, children, and the foreigners residing among them" (Joshua 8:34–35).

³⁴ And afterward he read all the words of the law, the blessings and the cursings, according to all that is written in the Book of the Law. ³⁵ There was not a word of all that Moses had

commanded which Joshua did not read before all the assembly of Israel, with the women, the little ones, and the strangers who were living among them.

—Joshua 8:34-35

It is important to recognize that in biblical Hebrew, the verb *likro* does not simply mean “to read,” but “to call” or “to proclaim.”ⁱ This nuance signals that the Torah was not merely read silently by members of the community but proclaimed aloud to the gathering of the people. While the reader engaged with the written text, the broader community experienced the divine word audibly. Thus, the word of God was intended to be heard, not seen—received through the ear rather than the eye.

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After entering the promised land, Israel did not remain faithful to its covenantal obligation to

publicly read God's commands during communal assemblies. A generation emerged that neither remembered nor acknowledged the works of the Lord, resulting in widespread neglect of His commands (Judges 2:10). This disregard ushered in extended periods of spiritual decline throughout Israel's history. Nevertheless, God remained faithful, repeatedly raising judges to lead and deliver His people. Yet, during the monarchy that followed, the pattern of ignoring God's word persisted. While a few kings genuinely sought the Lord, most deviated from His ways and did what was evil in His sight.

So severe was the neglect of the public reading of Scripture after the division of the kingdom under Rehoboam, the son of Solomon, that the Book of the Law was forgotten altogether. The northern kingdom chased after the false promises of other gods, and its people were eventually invaded, exiled, and destroyed. Meanwhile, in the southern kingdom of Judah, it was not until the seventh century B.C., in the reign of the Davidic king, Josiah, that the

forgotten Book of the Law was recovered (2 Kings 22-23). Its recovery, followed by the public reading of Scripture, prompted major reforms and a spiritual revival under King Josiah.

Later, the people of the kingdom of Judah, too, were exiled, the temple in Jerusalem destroyed, and in the turbulent years that followed, the synagogue emerged as a central institution in Jewish communal and religious life. Despite the dispersion of the people and the loss of the temple, exiled Jews preserved their covenantal identity by centering their communities around the Torah, gathering in homes and establishing synagogues throughout the diaspora. The few who returned to Jerusalem and began rebuilding the temple prioritized the practice of the public reading of Scripture—a tradition that solidified through synagogue worship throughout the exile.

The return of some Israelites to Canaan marked a significant renewal of their commitment to hearing and obeying God's word, leading to a profound spiritual revival. Under Ezra's

leadership, a major public reading of Scripture took place in the public square of the city, as described in Nehemiah 8, inspiring widespread grief at what Israel had lost but also joy and renewed devotion among the assembled people.

This event signaled a pivotal moment for those who returned from exile and reflected the renewed commitments of both Jews who returned to Canaan and those spread around the world. In exile, Jews adapted traditional temple practices to the synagogue context, integrating Scripture reading and teaching into communal life. These adaptations profoundly shaped their spiritual identity, enabling a transition to localized worship practices beyond Jerusalem.

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By late in the Second Temple period, synagogues were firmly established as essential centers of Israelite worship and communal life. E.P. Sanders, a prominent scholar of Second Temple Judaism, examines this development in the context of ancient synagogue practices. He references Flavius Josephus, the well-known first-century Roman-Jewish historian, who recorded that first-century Jews believed Moses had instructed the people to assemble regularly to listen to and learn from the Hebrew Scriptures.ⁱⁱ

The earliest known inscription from a synagogue, discovered in Jerusalem and describing a synagogue of the early first century B.C.E. there, attests to the synagogue's central purpose: it was built "for the reading of the Torah and the study of the commandments" as well as for related services of hospitality.ⁱⁱⁱ

Eric Meyers, a scholar of Judaic Studies, examines the significance of the Torah Ark, or Aron HaKodesh, the cabinet that housed Torah

scrolls in ancient synagogues. This sacred space symbolized the centrality of the Torah in Jewish religious life. According to Meyers, the ark and its scrolls express the Scripture's revered status within the community.^{iv}

For the law of Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath.

—*Acts 15:21*

The role of the synagogue is also affirmed in the New Testament. In Acts 15:21, Luke states, "For the law of Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the

synagogues on every Sabbath." The broadness of the phrase, "in every city," highlights the widespread and enduring tradition of Sabbath Scripture readings as a pillar of Jewish religious life.

New Testament scholar Rachel Hachlili further emphasizes this point, asserting that "the communal reading of Jewish Scripture was not

merely an aspect but a defining characteristic of synagogue institutions during the Second Temple period.”

This practice was essential, reinforcing the synagogue’s role as the center of Jewish religious and communal life, where the Torah and other Scriptures were preserved, publicly proclaimed, and taught.^v

In the light of archaeological evidence and scholarly study, the synagogue emerges as a vital institution that sustained the weekly rhythm of the public reading of Scripture, providing the Jewish people with spiritual nourishment and a strong sense of collective identity.

This environment served as a formative backdrop for the young Jesus, who would have

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internalized the Scriptures that later underpinned his teachings and mission.



These are pictures of the ancient synagogue at Capernaum, near the Sea of Galilee in Israel. The impressive white limestone ruins you see are from a 4th-5th century synagogue, built on top of an earlier black basalt foundation that many scholars believe belonged to the 1st-century synagogue mentioned in the Gospels, possibly the one funded by a Roman centurion (Luke 7:1-5).

The Significance of Synagogues in the Early 1st Century AD



Jesus' Synagogue Attendance and His Acquired Knowledge

Insights from historical and religious texts offer a vivid portrayal of how Jesus, like other Jews of his time, encountered God's word primarily in the synagogue. Given the scarcity, cost, and sacred status of scrolls, it is unlikely that his family possessed personal copies of Scripture during his upbringing as a carpenter's son. More importantly perhaps, Scripture itself was not conceived as writing for private consumption but words to be publicly read and heard. Consequently, Jesus' active participation

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in synagogue life played a crucial role in his formation by Scripture.

The Gospels frequently depict Jesus in synagogues, teaching about the kingdom of God and performing healings (Matthew 4:23-25). Even in the final days before his crucifixion, he remained present in synagogues and the temple, engaging in theological dialogue. He likely also taught outside the synagogue's formal schedule, in accordance with the customs of his time (Luke 4:16).

Thus, Jesus' deep knowledge of Scripture can be attributed to his consistent participation in the public reading of Scripture in the synagogue from the earliest days of his life. Gathered with other members of his Jewish community, he would have attentively absorbed "every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord," a passage he knew well from Deuteronomy 8:3.

So He humbled you, allowed you to hunger, and fed you with manna which you did not know nor did your fathers know, that He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord.

–Deuteronomy 8:3

Understanding the “Public Reading of Scripture” in 1 Timothy 4:13 through the Lens of Synagogue Practice

¹² Don’t let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity. ¹³ Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching.

1 Timothy 4:12-13

The Apostle Paul instructed Timothy to “devote” himself to the public reading of Scripture, exhortation, and teaching while awaiting Paul’s return to Ephesus. This guidance highlights key elements of early church life and affirms the significance of Timothy’s pastoral leadership despite his youth, as emphasized in 1 Timothy 4:12. Paul’s use of the word *devote* in verse 13 conveys a call to sustained commitment, underscoring the essential role of these practices in Christian worship.

The phrase *public reading of Scripture*, translated from the Greek *anagnōsis*, specifically refers to the public reading of what we now call the Old Testament. This practice reflects

the Jewish synagogue tradition, in which the Hebrew Bible was read aloud at great length to the assembled congregation every Sabbath, on sacred festivals, and at other times as well.

Following Jewish synagogue traditions, the early church practiced the public reading of the Hebrew Bible at its regular gatherings, typically in Greek translation. It also featured the public reading of apostolic letters and Gospel writings that circulated among Christian communities. Prior to the canonization of the New Testament in the fourth century, these texts—alongside the Hebrew Bible—were regarded as inspired and used for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness to equip God’s servants for every good work.

It is important to emphasize that the public reading of Scripture did not feature just a few verses that were read in a couple minutes and then expounded upon by a teacher for much more time. Instead, Scripture itself was read at great length, apparently enough in many places

for the community to hear the entire Torah along with much of the Prophets in one year. This would require a significant time of listening to Scripture each week. Justin Martyr, a second century A.D. Christian in

Rome, reports that Christians of his day gathered for most of the day on Sunday, devoting much of their time together to listening to the Gospels and the Scriptures of the Old Testament.^{vi} Thus, from the Jewish community of Jesus’s day to the gatherings of his disciples several generations later, the regular, public reading of lengthy portions of Scripture was bread for the life of the people of God.

As late as the fourth century A.D., disciples of Jesus regarded their lives and practices of worship as a continuation of the Jewish community, including its tradition of the public

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reading of Scripture. John Chrysostom, of that century, observed that many Christians of his day attended synagogues on Saturday and church services on Sunday. This phenomenon illustrates the continuity between Jewish and Christian worship, as elements of Jewish ritual were maintained in emerging Christian practices that centered on Christ.^{vii} Early Christians not only continued the practice of the public reading of Scripture, as Paul instructed Timothy, then. They also adapted that practice, with features such as the reading of the Gospels and a meal in memory of Christ, to focus their worship on the life and teachings of Jesus, who himself embodied faithful attention to God's word as rooted in the Hebrew Bible.

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The Synagogue: Then and Now

Why does Jesus' regular synagogue attendance over 2,000 years ago matter to contemporary believers? As the ultimate model of obedience, Jesus exemplified perfect attentiveness to God, and followers of Christ are called to pursue conformity to his image through faithful engagement with God's word. In his Letter to the Romans, Paul affirms that the Spirit enables believers in their transformation: "For those God foreknew he also predestined to

.....

For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.

—Romans 8:29

.....

be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters" (Romans 8:29).

The public reading of Scripture in synagogue worship today follows a detailed and reverent tradition, beginning with a solemn procession to retrieve the Torah scrolls from the ark. Designated members of the congregation then read Scripture portions from the annual and seasonal lectionary in a melodic chant, typically for 45 to 60 minutes. Following the reading, blessings are recited, and the scrolls are respectfully returned to the ark. This extended and reverent reading forms the centerpiece of synagogue worship, accompanied by prayers—primarily Psalms from the prayer book—a brief teaching by the rabbi, and other liturgical elements.

The enduring continuity of this practice of the community's listening to Scripture together over millennia offers Christ-followers a meaningful connection to the worship habits of Jesus.

From childhood through adulthood, Jesus consistently participated in synagogue worship, immersing himself in the hearing and internalization of God's Word.

Recognizing Jesus as the ultimate model of attentive listening and faithful obedience to the Father invites believers to follow his example by actively engaging in the public reading of Scripture, thereby cultivating their spiritual lives and deepening their relationship with God.

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Endnotes

- i. Jonathan Sacks, *Genesis: The Book of Beginnings (Covenant & Conversation 1)* (Kindle Edition), 203.
- ii. Steven Fine, *Jews, Christians and Polytheists in the Ancient Synagogue* (Taylor and Francis, Kindle Edition), 3.
- iii. Cited in Steven Fine, *This Holy Place: On the Sanctity of the Synagogue during the Greco-Roman Period* (Chicago: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 30.
- iv. Steven Fine, *Jews, Christians and Polytheists in the Ancient Synagogue* (Taylor and Francis, Kindle Edition), 178.
- v. Jordan J. Ryan, *The Role of the Synagogue in the Aims of Jesus* (Fortress Press, Kindle Edition), 69.
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- vii. James H. Charlesworth, "Prolegomenon to a New Study of the Jewish Background of the Hymns and Prayers in the New Testament," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 33 (1982): 269-270, cited by Paul F. Bradshaw, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship* (Oxford Press, 2002), 33.

Notes

¹⁶ *So He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up. And as His custom was, He went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and stood up to read.* ¹⁷ *And He was handed the book of the prophet Isaiah. And when He had opened the book, He found the place where it was written:*

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(Jesus quoting Deuteronomy 8:3)



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