The New Testament gospels contain stories of Jesus visiting synagogues in Galilee. Sometimes he taught in them or read scripture during worship. Unfortunately, the gospels provide few details of what these synagogues looked like. Were they majestic buildings or small structures? How were they furnished? The gospels remain silent.

Indeed, the gospels contain so little description that some scholars have suggested synagogues were simply gatherings that took place outdoors or in people's houses or courtyards. After all, the Greek word "sunagogé" means "coming together," and could indicate a meeting rather than a building.

Against this perspective, the first-century historian Flavius Josephus and other early sources indicate that in the first century the term sunagogé referred to a building in the descriptions placed into his stories of his time in Galilee.

To find out what first century synagogues looked like, then, we have to turn to archaeology. Although archaeologists have found that no synagogue that Jesus could have visited remains, several excavated structures have been proposed as synagogues from Jesus' lifetime.

Some of these synagogues appear in famous places, such as the fortresses of Masada and Herodium, and comprise buildings quickly erected by an army during a time of war. Another structure identified as a synagogue appears at the Maccabean palace outside Jericho and was built a century or more before Jesus' birth.

These buildings do not help us describe synagogues Jesus would have known because they do not appear in a village. They are either in palaces or army camps.

In recent years, four buildings found in villages of Palestine have been preliminarily identified as synagogues and dated to the late first century B.C. or the early first century A.D. These are Gamla in the Golan Heights, Magdala in the Galilee, and Qiryat Sefer and Modiin in western Judea.

Three of these synagogues share common features: Gamla, Qiryat Sefer and Modiin. Each one comprises a large public building made of stone blocks and featuring a large central room whose roof was supported by columns, usually arranged in rows. Other than the columns, the room was open. In two of these buildings, stone benches were built into the walls around the room's outside edge.

These features add up to a rather plain, unadorned public building. There is so little decoration in these that the only thing that indicates its Jewish character is its location in a Jewish village.

Moreover, these structures display no religious markings. They are obviously public buildings, but archaeologists cannot tell if they were built for worship or other religious activities, or whether they basically constitute a town hall or a meeting place for the village governing council.

Literary sources from the time indicate that a variety of activities took place in synagogues, some religious and some secular. Synagogues are described as meeting places for worship services, schools, and councils of elders. They also served as banks, hostels for travelers, and large banqueting halls. So perhaps the image of the synagogue in Jesus' time was as large, multi-purpose building whose religious function was just one of several roles it played in the community.

Of course, not all decoration is architectural. The plain architecture of these buildings may have been adorned with materials that did not survive the centuries. A hint of this appears in the Gamla and Qiryat Sefer buildings, where the central floors of the main rooms were dirt. This may be because it was covered with soft, decorative carpets and in turn suggests that people were required to remove their shoes and treat the interior with heightened respect, as we would expect for a synagogue.

A fourth public building has been discovered in Magdala, the town of Mary Magdalene. It is probably a synagogue, for it features a dressed stone with a carving of a menorah, a common Jewish symbol. Built with the same architectural features as the synagogues just mentioned, it also features a white mosaic floor and colored plaster walls.

The main question about this site is its dating. While its excavators claim evidence for the first century, the carving, the colored walls, and the mosaic are not otherwise known in synagogues earlier than the third or fourth century. Full publication of the excavation will certainly address this question in detail.

In the end, the best evidence for what synagogues were like in Jesus' day indicates they were large public buildings that were rather plain, although they could have contained different types of temporary decoration. These buildings probably served many functions other than worship, although it is possible that worship formed their primary purpose.

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