



**Interior of the
synagogue at
Capernaum.
Worshippers would
sit on benches
along the wall.**

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(10/17/1)



"The Scriptures"

IN PAUL'S DAY

By Dale "Geno" Robinson

PAUL GAVE TIMOTHY, his son in the ministry, two important bits of advice concerning the Word of God. First, he encouraged Timothy to read the Scripture aloud as part of the church's worship (1 Tim. 4:13). He then encouraged him to make Scripture the basis for his life, doctrine, and preaching (2 Tim. 3:1-15). Paul encouraged Timothy, to "continue in what you have learned and firmly believed," that is, the Jewish "sacred Scriptures" (vv. 14-15).¹

The Sacred Scriptures

Paul understood the "sacred Scriptures" to be those specific religious writings that tied the Jews to God. These books formed and influenced them for thousands of years. Those same books would support Timothy as he served Christ in the face of evil and apathy. This was not the Christian New Testament, as those books were not yet written. They were instead the section of our Bible we call the Old Testament.

Tenakh—The Jews called their holy writings the *Tenakh*, an abbreviation for the three sections of Scripture,

Torah, Nebee-im, and Kebutim.² The *Torah* consisted of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, also called the Five Books of Moses or the Pentateuch.

The *Nebee-im*, (Hebrew for "Prophets") consisted of the Former Prophets (Joshua; Judges; 1 and 2 Samuel; 1 and 2 Kings) and the Latter Prophets (Isaiah; Jeremiah; Ezekiel; and the twelve short books we call the Minor Prophets).

The *Kebutim* or Collected Writings was an important but difficult-to-classify collection of poetry, proverbs, and wisdom that shaped worship and guided daily living. This section included Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, and 1 and 2 Chronicles. Paul and Timothy loved and used the *Tenakh*, the same sacred Scriptures we love and use today as the Old Testament.

First-century Greek-speaking Jews also had access to other religious writings that were part of the Septuagint. These included Judith; Tobit; four books of the Maccabees; Sirach, also called Ecclesiasticus; the Wisdom of Solomon; the Psalms of Solomon; Greek Ezra; the Odes; Baruch; the Epistle of Jeremiah; Susannah; and Bel and the Dragon.³

The Canon of the Tenakh—Several historical markers confirm the content or canon of these Scriptures. The first marker was the Samaritan Pentateuch, which included Genesis through Deuteronomy (the five books also known as the *Torah*, meaning "the Law"). This confirms the canonization of the *Torah* by about 400 B.C. The



A strip of linen cloth is wrapped around a piece of rolled papyrus. The papyrus, which is from Egypt, dates to about 1070–664 B.C.



Left: Fragment of one of the Dead Sea Scrolls; part of the Greek translation of the Hebrew text, the Septuagint. The text is from Exodus 26:22-25.



Left: Cylindrical jar from Cave 1 at Qumran. Several such jars, dating before A.D. 70, were discovered at Qumran; they contained the Dead Sea Scrolls.

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FAST FACT

“*Diaspora*” is related to our English word “disperse.” The term refers to Jews who were scattered from their homeland because of various wars beginning with the Assyrian exile in 722 B.C., continuing with the Babylonian Captivity in 586 B.C., and even into the New Testament Era, when the Romans conquered Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

Many Jews settled into other lands and, even when given the opportunity to do otherwise, refused to return to Israel. This explains the presence of Jewish communities and synagogues throughout the Mediterranean world in Paul’s day.

second marker was the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Torah and other books, which was in widespread use in the Diaspora. The third marker was the archaeological evidence provided by the over 200 Old Testament fragments that were part of the Dead Sea Scrolls, which were found at Qumran. These date from the third century B.C. to the destruction of Qumran in A.D. 70. A fourth marker is Josephus’s testimony in *Against Apion*.⁴ Paul further confirmed the first-century Scriptures by his extensive use of the Septuagint, the original Hebrew Scriptures, and his own paraphrases.⁵

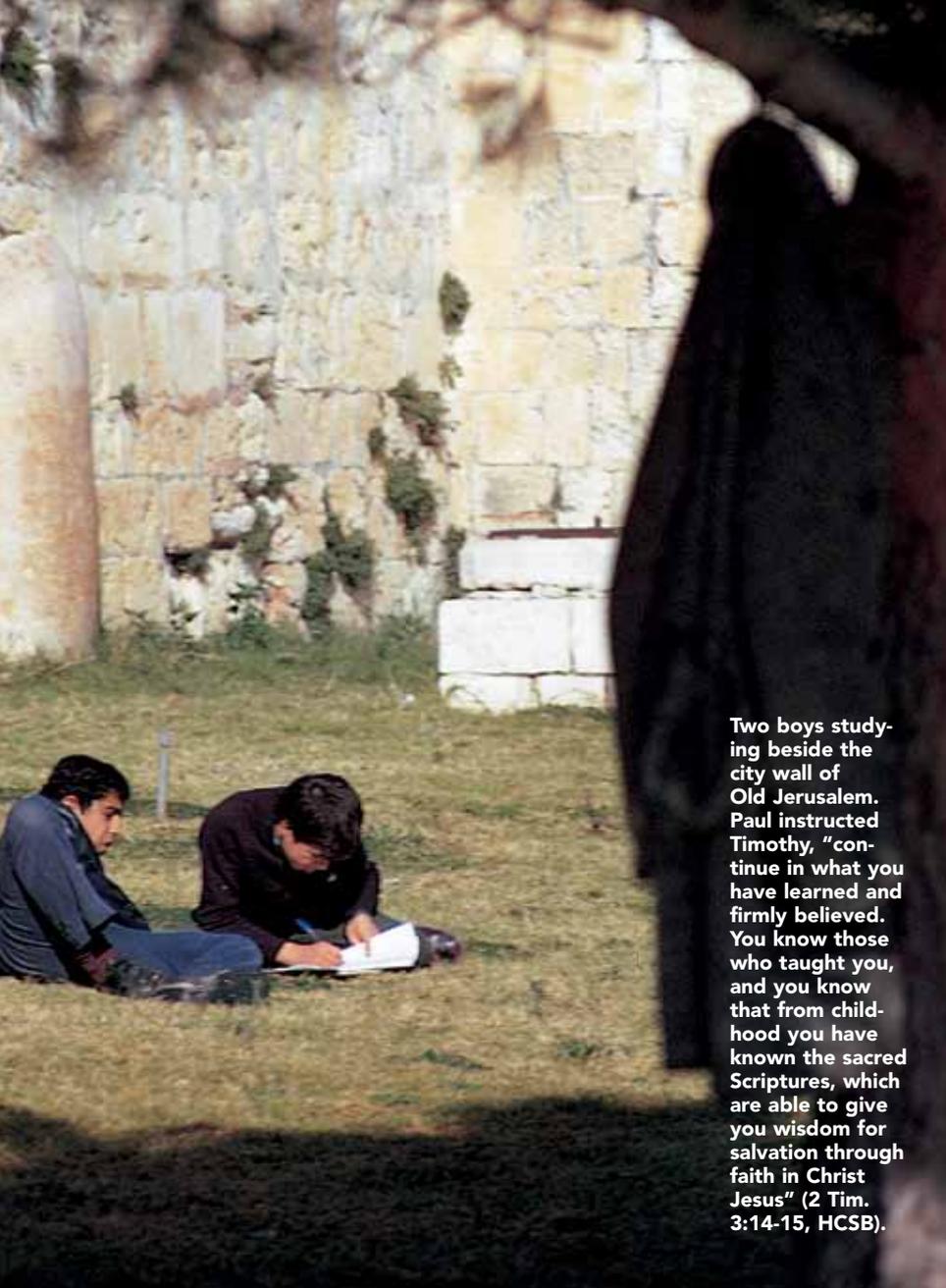
Learning Scripture

Eunice, who was Timothy’s mother, was a practicing Jew who, along with her mother, Lois, taught him Scriptures in their home. Where, though, would they have learned? Likely in the synagogue and in their homes growing up.

The synagogue helped lay the foundation for Jews’ understanding of the Scriptures. This uniquely Jewish institution developed for “the purpose of reading the Law and learning its commandments.”⁶ At first, the term “synagogue” applied to the people

who gathered. Then, as early as the second century B.C., Jews applied the term to the building which functioned as the *Bet ha-Tefilah*, the house of prayer; the *Bet ha-Midrash*, the house of study; and the *Bet Am*, the house of the people or community center.⁷

The oldest-discovered synagogues were not uniform in size or style, but they all had many of the same



Two boys studying beside the city wall of Old Jerusalem. Paul instructed Timothy, “continue in what you have learned and firmly believed. You know those who taught you, and you know that from childhood you have known the sacred Scriptures, which are able to give you wisdom for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 3:14-15, HCSB).

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features. The building often, but not necessarily, faced Jerusalem. In each was a large, open gathering area with benches for seating. The center area was an open space perhaps where male attendees either sat or stood. An elevated platform (or *bema*) was at one end with a pulpit or elevated desk used for reading the Scripture. Ornate seats (or *kathedra*) were for special guests or the day’s guest reader. Some synagogues had an adjacent room or an upstairs gallery, which some believe was for women worshipers.

The synagogue congregation held the Scripture scrolls in high esteem. Each scroll was meticulously hand copied and was available for reading

only in the synagogue. These sacred Scriptures were read aloud, perhaps systematically, in worship and study.

Jews stored the scrolls safely in an ornate chest or ark, which often had wheels. When the Scriptures were to be read, the synagogue attendant would bring in this chest, withdraw the scrolls, have someone read them, and then replace them carefully (see Luke 4:16-20). In later centuries, the portable chest was replaced with a permanent niche or closet, called the ark, placed in the wall behind or near the *bema*, often with ornate doors. Jews did not destroy worn-out scrolls but permanently stored them in a special place called a *genizah*.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ GB HOWELL (35/48/17)

Above: Part of a column capital from Capernaum shows a Torah ark on wheels. The

Old Testament scrolls would be kept in an ark and rolled out for use in the synagogue.

By the first century, most Diaspora Jews had long since adopted Greek as their first language. They no longer used or understood Aramaic. Like Jews everywhere, they had practically forgotten Hebrew. They read the Torah, the Prophets, and the rest of the Scriptures in Greek from the Septuagint. A reader, chosen by the synagogue’s president, read the text. Afterward, someone would comment on the text’s meaning.

By the first century, the Hebrew language was left to the rabbis. Jews living in their homeland spoke and thought in Aramaic; Diaspora Jews spoke and thought mainly in Greek. Aramaic synagogues did exist; in these, worshipers read the Torah in Hebrew. Again, this reading was followed by someone commenting on the text.

Timothy’s Study Methods

Some New Testament scholars believe Timothy learned the Scriptures in the synagogue in Lystra—that he was able to attend as a youth, along with his mother and grandmother. Some claim



Model of the synagogue at Capernaum. The area on the left was where the Jewish congregation gathered for worship. The adjoining room is thought to have been a classroom where the Scriptures were taught.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/GB HOWELL (95/85/62)

Timothy may have attended a private Torah school.⁸ Others believe, though, that Timothy, being uncircumcised, could not attend synagogue as a youth.

Undoubtedly, Timothy heard his mother, grandmother, and other local Jews discussing Scriptures. These conversations helped him memorize Scripture. Further, he likely participated in discussions with people around him about the meaning and application of Scriptures. Whether Timothy's exposure was at home, in the community, or in the synagogue, Paul reminded him, "you know that from childhood you have known the sacred Scriptures" (2 Tim. 3:16a).

Since literacy was a chief value of both the Greeks and the Jews, Timothy learned to read, a skill he needed in order to function in Greek culture. After Paul circumcised him, Timothy would have had full access to any synagogue. These worship services would have given Timothy the opportunity to actually read texts that perhaps he had only discussed earlier.

Timothy read, studied, and memorized Scripture in obedience to the command of Deuteronomy 11:18:

Right: A young Jewish male in his 20s or early 30s wearing the talith (prayer shawl), and the frontlet of the phylactery containing Scripture from Deuteronomy, which is attached to the leather strap that encircles the head and drawn tight down the left arm. He and his brother (right) are at the Western Wall in Jerusalem.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ KEN TOUCHTON (1/3/38)

"Imprint these words of mine on your hearts and minds, bind them as a sign on your hands, and let them be a symbol on your foreheads." No wonder Paul encouraged him to remember what he "learned and firmly believed...the sacred Scriptures, which are able to give you wisdom for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 3:14-15). **B**

1. All Scripture quotations are from the Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB).
 2. Leo Trepp, *Judaism: Development and Life*, 2nd ed. (Encino, CA: Dickenson Publishing, 1974), 144.
 3. Eduard Lohse, *The New Testament Environment*, trans. John E. Steely (Nashville: Abingdon, 1974), 130.
 4. Josephus, *Against Apion* 1:8.
 5. E. Earl Ellis, *Paul's Use of the Old Testament* (1981; repr.,

Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2003), 11. According to Ellis, Paul quotes the Old Testament 93 separate times. See also Dale G. Robinson, "Paul's Use of the Old Testament in Romans," *Biblical Illustrator* 32, no. 2 (Winter 2005-2006): 68-72.

6. John J. Rousseau and Rami Arav, *Jesus and His World: An Archaeological and Cultural Dictionary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 142. In 1914, archaeologists in Jerusalem uncovered a Greek plaque with this inscription near the ruins of a large building thought to be a first-century synagogue. This is one of the few indications of the purpose of the synagogue from Jesus' day.

7. Trepp, *Judaism*, 220.

8. See S.M. Baugh, "2 Timothy" in *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: Romans to Philemon*, gen. ed. Clinton E. Arnold, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 491.

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