SCROLL & STONE - GCSE RELIGIOUS STUDIES: JUDAISM

The synagogue and its worship

A starting point for teachers to adapt - a GCSE lesson on the features of a synagogue, the prayers said there, and the stones that show how old both are, from Jerusalem before 70 CE to the City of London in 1701.

Matched to AQA GCSE Religious Studies A (8062) 3.1.6.2; Pearson Edexcel GCSE Religious Studies B (1RB0) Area of Study 1F, 3.1, 3.3, 3.4 and 3.8; OCR GCSE Religious Studies (J625/03), Practices: Worship and Prayer.

scrollandstone.org

16 November 2026

DRAFT - AWAITING THE OWNER'S REVIEW ROUND

LESSON PLAN

The synagogue and its worship

A starting point for teachers to adapt to their own classes - the route, groupings and timings below are ideas to build on, not a fixed script.

Level: GCSE Religious Studies (Judaism); usable with KS3 RE using the KS3 route
Suggested length: 60 minutes, plus an optional 20-minute extension
Materials: one printed pupil worksheet per pupil, pencils. Optional: a photograph of a local synagogue interior, or the official website of a synagogue near you.

Specification match

Wording below is quoted or closely summarised from each board's current published specification (checked 16 November 2026). Check your own centre's entry before teaching.

Board and code	Content this pack teaches	Not covered here
AQA GCSE Religious Studies A **8062**, Component 1, 3.1.6 Judaism, 3.1.6.2 Practices: The synagogue and worship	"The synagogue and its importance." "The design and religious features of synagogues including bimah (reading platform), aron hakodesh (ark), ner tamid (ever burning light) and associated practices; differences between Orthodox and Reform synagogues." "The significance of prayer, including the Amidah, the standing prayer."	Orthodox and Reform synagogues and services in detail (see the divergent-views task).
Pearson Edexcel GCSE Religious Studies B **1RB0**, Paper 1, Area of Study 1F Judaism, Section 3 Living the Jewish Life, **3.1, 3.3, 3.4, 3.8**	Public worship and synagogue services (3.1); prayer three times a day (3.3); the Shema and the Amidah, with reference to the mezuzah and Deuteronomy 6:4 (3.4); synagogue design "including facing Jerusalem, layout of seating the Ark and the bimah", Exodus 27:20-21, and objects including the Torah scroll and ner tamid (3.8).	The interpretations of Psalms 116, Psalms 55 and Proverbs 14:28; Liberal synagogue design; the yad and menorah.
OCR GCSE Religious Studies **J625/03** Judaism, Practices: Worship and Prayer	The importance of the synagogue: design and artefacts; "the significance of the Ark, the Bimah, the lack of representation of G-d, the Ner Tamid"; "the connection between the synagogue and the Temple"; the Amidah, the three daily periods of prayer, the Shema and the direction faced when praying.	The Mikveh; the structure of a full service; sermons.

Purpose and required outcome

Pupils identify the main features of a synagogue, explain what each is for and what it means, and link the main prayers to their sources. They then test a common claim, "the synagogue was invented to

replace the Temple after 70 CE", against a stone inscription from Jerusalem. The lesson asks what each source can support. It does not ask pupils to judge a religious belief.

Every pupil completes the core route: the floor-plan labelling, the feature-meaning-source table, the Temple-and-synagogue evidence task, one board-matched exam question and an exit ticket.

By the end, pupils can:

- name and explain the ark (aron hakodesh), the bimah, the ner tamid and the direction of prayer;
- explain the Shema and the Amidah and when they are said; and
- use evidence to explain the connection between the synagogue and the Temple.

Suggested 60-minute route

Minutes	Required activity	Evidence and output
0-6	Introduce the layer key. Show the floor plan: where would you put the most important object in this room, and why?	Pupils annotate the layer key.
6-18	Teacher models the ark and the ner tamid with cards A1-A2, then pairs label the floor plan.	Labelled floor plan.
18-28	Pairs complete the feature-meaning-source table using cards A1-A4.	Table completed.
28-36	Prayer: cards B1-B3, the Shema, the Amidah and three daily services.	Prayer questions answered.
36-42	Evidence hearing: the Theodotos inscription. Did the synagogue replace the Temple, or stand beside it?	One bounded claim with its limit.
42-56	Individual exam practice for each pupil's own board.	AQA 6-mark, Edexcel 5-mark or OCR 6-mark answer.
56-60	Exit ticket.	One feature, its meaning, its source.

Optional extensions

- Divergent views (20 minutes): two buildings, two traditions. Use the Bevis Marks and Touro cards and the "Two traditions" notes, then add Orthodox and Reform differences from the textbook or class notes.
- "The lack of representation of G-d": compare Exodus 20:4 with the Beit Alpha note in the teacher notes. What did ancient synagogue artists show, and what did they not?

- Plan the 12- or 15-mark evaluation question for your board.

Distinct outcomes

- **KS3 required output:** the labelled floor plan and a four-sentence final response from the stems. Accept 60-90 words.
- **GCSE required output:** one board-matched exam answer that names a feature or prayer, explains its meaning and refers accurately to a source of wisdom and authority.

Differentiation and access route

- **KS3 support:** give the feature names as a word bank on the board; label the ark together first.
- **GCSE stretch:** ask pupils to explain how each feature "remembers" the Temple, and to say where the evidence for that link is strong or weak.
- **EAL:** pre-teach ark, platform, lamp, scroll, prayer, inscription and Temple.
- **SEND and large-print route:** print at 16-point type or present on a high-contrast screen. Use the reduced oral grid; a pupil may point to the floor plan. A trusted adult may scribe verbatim, or the pupil may use speech-to-text.
- **Motor and handwriting access:** accept labelled sticky notes on the floor plan or an oral answer recorded by a scribe.
- **No-device route:** all required evidence is in the worksheet.

Sensitivity and context

- Synagogues are working places of worship. If you plan a visit, contact the synagogue in advance and follow its guidance on dress and behaviour; many welcome school groups.
- Do not ask pupils to act out prayer. Describing words and gestures in translation is enough.
- Synagogues differ between communities and traditions. Avoid presenting one layout as the only correct one.

Teacher preparation

Read the teacher notes and source ledger. Every factual statement in this pack is traced there to a Scroll & Stone article or to a named primary text. The Bevis Marks article is especially useful for British classes: it is the oldest synagogue in the United Kingdom still in continuous use, and it can be visited.

PUPIL WORKSHEET

Inside a synagogue

Name: _____ Class: _____

Layers of evidence

- **[S] Scripture:** the Tenakh, the written law, a source of wisdom and authority.
- **[R] Rabbinic and later teaching:** the Mishnah, the Talmud and later Jewish teachers.
- **[M] Material evidence:** a real object or building you could go and see.
- **[P] Practice today:** what synagogues and Jewish families do now.

Word bank: aron hakodesh (ark), bimah (reading platform), ner tamid (continual light), Sefer Torah (Torah scroll), Shema, Amidah, Jerusalem, Temple.

Part A - The features

A1. The ark - a shrine for the scrolls [M]

Synagogues keep their Torah scrolls in an ark at the front of the prayer hall. In the ruins of the synagogue at Nabratein, a village in the Upper Galilee, archaeologists found in 1980 a carved limestone gable flanked by two lions. It is read as the top of a built Torah shrine, and it is the earliest known Torah shrine to survive as an actual structure rather than a picture. The excavators date it to the third century CE; after it fell, it was buried in the bimah of the rebuilt synagogue.

Read more: The Nabratein Ark

A2. The ner tamid - the light that does not go out [S]

Exodus 27:20-21 and Leviticus 24:1-4 command a lamp of pure olive oil to burn continually in the Tabernacle. "Ner tamid" means a continual light. In later centuries synagogues came to hang a lamp before the ark, in memory of the lamp of the Tabernacle and Temple. Today it may burn oil or be electric; Jewish teachers have disagreed about whether an electric light counts as a flame, and both are found in synagogues.

Read more: The lamp that should not go out

A3. Facing Jerusalem [M]

The Touro Synagogue in Newport, Rhode Island, consecrated in 1763, is the oldest surviving synagogue building in the United States. It is set at an angle to the street so that the ark faces east, towards Jerusalem. Inside, a raised bimah in the centre faces the ark, and there is a women's gallery above.

Read more: The Touro Synagogue, Newport

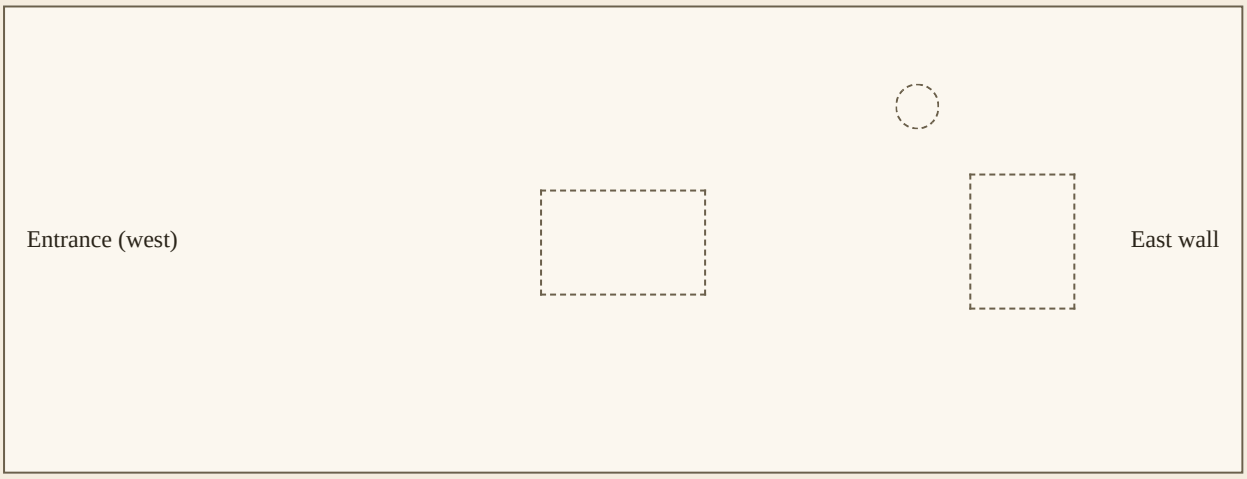
A4. A London synagogue since 1701 [M]

Jews were expelled from England in 1290. After their informal readmission in the 1650s, a Sephardi congregation opened a synagogue on Creechurch Lane in the City of London in 1657, the first in England since the expulsion. The same congregation built Bevis Marks Synagogue, consecrated in 1701. It is the oldest synagogue in the United Kingdom in continuous use and a Grade I listed building. The reader's platform stands towards the west end, facing the ark at the east wall, and the brass chandeliers are still lit with candles for major services.

Read more: Bevis Marks, London

Label the floor plan

Mark and label: the aron hakodesh (ark), the bimah, the ner tamid, and an arrow showing the direction of Jerusalem. This plan has the ark on the east wall, like Bevis Marks.



Feature, meaning, source

Feature	What it is and what it is for	What it means or remembers	Source or evidence
Aron hakodesh (ark)			

Feature	What it is and what it is for	What it means or remembers	Source or evidence
Bimah			
Ner tamid			
Facing Jerusalem			

Part B - Prayer

B1. The Shema [S]

The Shema begins with Deuteronomy 6:4, the declaration that God is one, and is said morning and evening. The same command, to write these words "on the doorposts of your house and on your gates", is why Jews fix a mezuzah to the doorpost: a small handwritten parchment scroll containing Deuteronomy 6:4-9 and 11:13-21. Among the Dead Sea Scrolls from Qumran Cave 4 are seven mezuzah texts, catalogued as 4Q149-4Q155.

Read more: A Line on the Doorpost

B2. The Amidah, the standing prayer [R]

The Amidah is prayed standing and is the centre of each service. The Talmud (Berakhot 33a and Megillah 17b) credits the Men of the Great Assembly, the council of sages tradition places in the time of Ezra, with fixing its text. The same passage also says that Shimon HaPakuli arranged its blessings in order at Yavneh, after the Temple fell. Modern scholars are cautious about any single origin story, but the tradition shows how much Jews wanted their central prayer to be ancient, shared and ordered.

Read more: The Men of the Great Assembly and The Order of the Words

B3. Three services a day [P]

Jewish prayer is organised into three daily services: Shacharit (morning), Mincha (afternoon) and Ma'ariv (evening). The prayers are collected in the siddur, the prayer book. The first full prayer order to survive in recognisable form is Seder Rav Amram, sent from Babylonia to the Jews of Spain in the ninth century. Communities developed different rites, such as Ashkenaz and Sepharad, within one shared order.

Read more: The Order of the Words

1. Why might Jews say the Shema both morning and evening? Use Deuteronomy 6.

2. Why does it matter to many Jews that the Amidah has a fixed text?

Part C - Evidence hearing: the synagogue and the Temple

C1. The Theodotos inscription [M]

A limestone block with ten lines of Greek, found in 1913 on the City of David hill in Jerusalem. Most scholars date it before the Temple was destroyed in 70 CE; a minority argue for a later date. It says that Theodotos, a priest and synagogue leader, built the synagogue "for the reading of the Law and the teaching of the commandments", with a guest-house and water installations for visitors from abroad. It does not mention prayer. It is in the Rockefeller Archaeological Museum, Jerusalem.

Read more: The Synagogue Before the Fall

Claim to test: "The synagogue was invented to replace the Temple after it was destroyed in 70 CE."

Question	Your answer
What does the inscription directly support?	
Does it support the claim above? Why or why not?	
One limit of this evidence	
Rewrite the claim so the evidence can support it	

Two traditions, two buildings

- The New Israelite Temple opened in Hamburg in 1818 as an early, permanent home of Reform Judaism.

- In the nineteenth century the Reform movement brought the organ into the synagogue. It was one of the most argued-over changes of the time. One reason was the long-standing custom, kept as a sign of mourning for the Temple, of not using instruments in worship.
- The Touro Synagogue (card A3) has a women's gallery, so men and women sit separately, as in many Orthodox synagogues today.

Add one more difference between Orthodox and Reform synagogues or services from your textbook or class notes:

Exam practice - answer the question for your board

These are practice questions written in each board's style for this pack. They are not real past-paper questions.

AQA (8062) - 6 marks. Explain two ways in which features of a synagogue are important in Jewish worship. Refer to sacred writings or another source of Jewish belief and teaching in your answer.

Pearson Edexcel (1RB0) - 5 marks. Explain two reasons why the Shema is important for Jews today. In your answer you must refer to a source of wisdom and authority.

OCR (J625/03) - 6 marks. Outline the connection between the synagogue and the Temple.

_____

_____

KS3 route - complete all four lines

The most important object in a synagogue is _____ because _____.

The ner tamid is _____ and it remembers _____.

Synagogues face _____ because _____.

The Theodotos inscription shows that _____.

Reduced oral grid - SEND / scribe route

Choose one feature or prayer. Point, say or dictate an answer. A scribe may record your exact words.

My feature or prayer	Where or when	What it is for	Where it comes from

Exit ticket

Finish this sentence: "In a synagogue the _____ is important because _____, and this comes from _____."

_____

The synagogue: teacher notes

Ideas for teachers to build on - adapt the wording, groupings and pacing below to your own class.

Status and source boundary

This is a text-only classroom draft. It reproduces no images. Every factual statement is traced in the source ledger below. The pack's sources do not set out Orthodox and Reform service differences in detail, cover the mikveh as a GCSE topic, or interpret Psalms 55, Psalms 116 or Proverbs 14:28, so the pack points pupils to their textbook for those rather than filling the gap with unsourced claims.

Answers and accepted alternatives

Floor plan

Ark on the east wall (the dashed box at the right); bimah in the centre or towards the west, facing the ark (the dashed box in the middle); ner tamid in front of or above the ark (the small circle); Jerusalem arrow pointing east, for a synagogue in Britain. Accept a bimah at the front if the pupil explains that some synagogues place it there; the plan shows the arrangement of Bevis Marks.

Feature, meaning, source

Feature	What it is and what it is for	Meaning	Source or evidence
Ark	The cabinet or shrine at the front that holds the Torah scrolls; it faces Jerusalem.	The holiest place in the room, because it holds the Torah; the tradition links it to the Ark of the Covenant and the Temple's holy of holies.	Nabratein gable [M]; accept the Touro and Bevis Marks cards.
Bimah	The raised reading platform from which the Torah is read aloud.	The Torah is read publicly to the whole community, as Theodotos's synagogue was built "for the reading of the Law".	Touro and Bevis Marks [M]; for public reading of the Torah, the Theodotos inscription [M].
Ner tamid	A lamp kept burning before the ark.	Remembers the lamp in the Tabernacle and Temple; God's presence and the continuity of the tradition. The synagogue lamp is a custom that developed over many centuries.	Exodus 27:20-21; Leviticus 24:1-4 [S].

Feature	What it is and what it is for	Meaning	Source or evidence
Facing Jerusalem	The ark is placed so that the congregation prays towards Jerusalem.	Jerusalem and the site of the Temple remain the focus of Jewish prayer.	Touro, set at an angle to face east [M].

Prayer questions

- **1.** Deuteronomy 6:7 tells Jews to speak of these words "when you lie down and when you rise up", so the Shema is said evening and morning. Accept "to start and end the day by declaring that God is one".
- **2.** A fixed text unites Jews everywhere in the same words; it connects them to the tradition of the Men of the Great Assembly; it gives shape to prayer so it is shared, not improvised. Credit a pupil who also notes that communities developed different rites within the shared order.

Evidence hearing

- **Directly supports:** a synagogue in Jerusalem, built by a priest and synagogue leader, for reading the Torah and teaching the commandments, with lodging for visitors from abroad.
- **Does it support the claim?** No, if the date before 70 CE is accepted, as most scholars accept it: the synagogue already existed beside the Temple, doing a different job. Credit pupils who notice that the dating is not unanimous.
- **Limits:** one inscription from one city; the date is argued over; the stone was found reused, so the building's original site is unknown; it does not mention prayer.
- **Better claim:** "Synagogues for reading and teaching the Torah existed in Jerusalem before 70 CE; after the Temple was destroyed, they took on more of the role of Jewish worship." The second half is supported by The Shabbat Table article on the Temple's destruction, not by this stone.

Model answers

AQA 6-mark model (features of a synagogue)

One important feature is the aron hakodesh, the ark, which holds the Torah scrolls. It is placed on the wall facing Jerusalem, so when Jews pray towards it they also face the city where the Temple stood. The ark is the focus of the room because the Torah is the most sacred object Jews possess. A second feature is the ner tamid, the light kept burning before the ark. Exodus 27:20-21 commands a lamp of olive oil to burn continually in the Tabernacle, so the ner tamid reminds Jews of God's constant presence and of the Temple, and links the synagogue to the worship that once took place there.

Edexcel 5-mark model (the Shema)

The Shema is important because it states the central Jewish belief that God is one: "Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One" (Deuteronomy 6:4). Saying it every morning and evening means a Jew begins and ends each day by accepting that belief. It is also important because it shapes the Jewish home. Deuteronomy 6:9 commands these words to be written on the doorposts, so Jews fix a mezuzah containing the Shema to their doors and are reminded of God whenever they come and go.

OCR 6-mark model (synagogue and Temple)

The synagogue has a close connection with the Temple in Jerusalem. While the Temple stood, it was the place of sacrifice, but synagogues already existed for reading and teaching the Torah, as the Theodotos inscription from Jerusalem shows. After the Temple was destroyed in 70 CE, prayer and Torah study in the synagogue became the centre of Jewish worship. Many features remember the Temple: the ner tamid recalls the lamp that burned continually in the Tabernacle and Temple (Exodus 27:20-21), the ark holding the Torah recalls the holiest part of the Temple, and synagogues face Jerusalem, so that every service is directed towards the place where the Temple stood. Ezekiel 11:16 speaks of God being "a small sanctuary" for the exiles, and the Talmud (Megillah 29a) applies this to the synagogue.

Evaluation questions (12 or 15 marks) - planning frames only

- **AQA (12, plus up to 3 for SPaG):** "Jews do not need a synagogue in order to worship God." Evaluate this statement.
- **Edexcel (12, plus 3 for SPaG on some questions):** "The Amidah is more important than the Shema." Evaluate this statement considering arguments for and against.
- **OCR (15):** "A synagogue should contain no images at all." Discuss this statement, referring to common and divergent views within Judaism and to sources of wisdom and authority.

Useful evidence from this pack: the Shema and the mezuzah at home, and the Shabbat table, against public reading of the Torah and the Amidah in the synagogue; the Theodotos inscription; Exodus 20:4 against ancient synagogue art. The Beit Alpha synagogue floor in the Beit She'an valley, of the early sixth century CE, shows the Binding of Isaac, a zodiac wheel and a Torah shrine; God is represented only by a hand reaching into the scene. Read more: The Floor That Looked Up.

Marking checklist

1. Names a feature or prayer accurately.
2. Explains what it is for and what it means to Jews.
3. Names a relevant source of wisdom and authority or piece of evidence.
4. Links the source to the feature, rather than placing it alongside.

Exam answers: use your board's published mark scheme and levels of response.

Misconceptions and language

- The synagogue is not "the Jewish church", and it did not simply replace the Temple: the evidence shows synagogues standing beside it.
- The ark in a synagogue is not the biblical Ark of the Covenant; it is named after it.
- The ner tamid is not a memorial candle for the dead; it is a continual light before the ark.
- Not every synagogue looks the same. The ark on the wall facing Jerusalem is the usual arrangement; where the bimah stands and how seating is arranged vary.

Source ledger

Every statement in the pupil worksheet, with where to check it. Articles are on scrollandstone.org; primary texts are on Sefaria (sefaria.org).

Statement	Where to check it
Nabratein gable: lions; Upper Galilee; found 1980; built Torah shrine; earliest surviving built example; third century CE, later buried in the bimah of the rebuilt synagogue.	The Nabratein Ark (identification). For the date: E. M. Meyers, J. F. Strange and C. L. Meyers, "The Ark of Nabratein: A First Glance", Biblical Archaeologist 44 (1981). The site article gives a sixth-century date and is queued for correction.
Ner tamid: Exodus 27:20-21, Leviticus 24:1-4; "continual light"; lamp before the ark, a custom that developed over centuries; oil and electric lamps; disagreement over electric light.	The lamp that should not go out
Touro Synagogue: 1763; oldest surviving US synagogue building; angled so the ark faces east to Jerusalem; central bimah; women's gallery.	The Touro Synagogue, Newport
Expulsion 1290; readmission 1650s; Creechurch Lane 1657; Bevis Marks 1701, oldest UK synagogue in continuous use, Grade I; reader's platform towards the west facing the ark at the east wall; chandeliers lit with candles for principal services.	Bevis Marks, London
Shema: Deuteronomy 6:4; morning and evening; mezuzah contents Deuteronomy 6:4-9 and 11:13-21; Qumran 4Q149-4Q155.	A Line on the Doorpost; The Order of the Words; Deuteronomy 6:4-9

Statement	Where to check it
Amidah prayed standing, centre of the service; Talmud credits the Men of the Great Assembly (Berakhot 33a, Megillah 17b) and Shimon HaPakuli at Yavneh (Megillah 17b, Berakhot 28b); scholarly caution.	The Men of the Great Assembly; The Order of the Words
Shacharit, Mincha, Ma'ariv; siddur; Seder Rav Amram, ninth century, Babylonia to Spain; different rites.	The Order of the Words
Theodotos inscription: limestone, ten lines of Greek, found 1913, City of David; mostly dated before 70 CE, minority later; reading of the Law, teaching of the commandments, guest-house; no mention of prayer; Rockefeller Archaeological Museum.	The Synagogue Before the Fall
Hamburg New Israelite Temple 1818, an early permanent home of Reform Judaism.	The Portuguese Merchants of the Elbe
Organ introduced by nineteenth-century Reform; contested, one reason being the mourning custom against instruments since the Temple's destruction.	The instruments fall silent
Synagogue as "a small sanctuary".	Ezekiel 11:16; Talmud Megillah 29a
Beit Alpha: Beit She'an valley, early sixth century; Binding of Isaac, zodiac, Torah shrine; a hand for God.	The Floor That Looked Up; Exodus 20:4
Specification wording, codes and question tariffs.	AQA 8062 specification (September 2025 version), 3.1.6.2 and 4.4.1, with AQA's 2026 assessment update; Pearson Edexcel 1RB0 specification, Issue 2 (January 2024), 1F 3.1, 3.3, 3.4, 3.8; OCR J625 specification, Version 2.0 (July 2026), J625/03 Practices.

Further reading on the site

The Painted Synagogue (Dura-Europos, 244/45 CE); The Temple in a Galilee Room; A Yemeni Torah Case; The Synagogues of the Venice Ghetto.