PALESTINE IN THE TIME OF JESUS

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

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Herod's Temple

The second Temple stood for 500 years. But during this time Israel was conquered first by the Greeks and then by the Romans. Both these robbed the Temple of many of its treasures.

Herod the Great was made king of the Jews in 37 BC. In order to win the favour of the people Herod made plans to rebuild the Temple. But he did not pull down the old building until all the materials had been gathered for the new one. It was to be a very magnificent building indeed.

Work began on Herod's Temple in 20 BC. The main building was completed in 1 1/2 years by one thousand specially trained priests. Huge blocks of white stone were used for the walls. This building had the same length and breadth as Solomon's Temple but it was about 5 metres higher.

The rest of the Temple buildings and the Courts, which occupied a larger area than the two previous Temples, were not completed until AD 64, many years after Herod had died. Only a few years later, in AD 70, the Temple was destroyed by the Romans. All that remains of it today is the Walling Wall. Since then no Temple has been built by the Jews. Today a Mohammedan Mosque stands on the Temple site in Jerusalem.
Herod's Temple was certainly a magnificent building. Much marble, expensive woods and gold were used. The Temple building was surrounded by two Courts — the Outer Court and the Inner Court. The Outer Court was called the Court of the Gentiles. (A Gentile was a person who was not a Jew.) So anyone could go into the Outer Court. Here people changed their money into coins suitable for the Temple offering — that is, coins which did not have a head engraved upon them — and also bought animals and birds for sacrifices.

The Outer Court was surrounded by porches with huge pillars. Three people, with their arms outstretched, could just encircle one of these pillars. People gathered in the porches to listen to the Jewish teachers of the Law. This is where Jesus was found by his parents when he was twelve years old.

A low wall about 1½ metres high separated the Outer Court from the Inner Court. On this were notices forbidding non-Jews to go any further. There were nine gates leading into the Inner Court. All the gates were covered in silver and gold except one. This was made of brass from Corinth and called 'Gate Beautiful'.

Here Peter and John healed a lame man. Read the story in Acts 3, versus 1-10. Act this story with some friends.

The Inner Court of Herod's Temple had three parts: first, there was the Court of the Women. Jewish men as well as women could enter this Court, but the women could go no further. Public worship and prayer were held regularly in this Court.

The offerings for the upkeep of the Temple were placed in thirteen chests with trumpet-shaped openings called the Treasury. The money in each of these boxes was used for a different purpose, for example, the incense that burned on the altar, or the wood used for the fire for the sacrifices.

Jesus watched a poor widow put her gift in the Treasury. Read about this in Mark 12 verses 41-44. Imagine you were one of the disciples watching. Write an account of what happened.
Secondly, there was the smaller Court of Israel where Jewish men met to pray and watch the priests offer sacrifices in the third Court — the Court of the Priests.

The Court of the Priests contained the huge Altar of Sacrifice, made of unhewn stones, and the Laver or large basin, where the priests washed before offering sacrifices. There were rings on the floor to which animals were tethered before they were sacrificed. The carcasses were prepared on eight marble tables. It has been said that this part of the Temple was more like a butcher’s slaughterhouse. Try to imagine the scene with all the noise and the smell of the animals. It is difficult for us to think of this as a place of worship.

The Holy Place, as in the previous Temples, contained the golden Altar of Incense, a golden table for the showbread, and a seven-branched candlestick. On the east side was a porch with twelve steps leading up to the enormous entrance to the Holy Place. This entrance had two golden doors, and these were surrounded by a vine made in gold.

The Most Holy Place (Holy of Holies) was completely empty as the Ark was never replaced. The only person who could go into this part of the Temple was the High (or Chief) Priest, and he could only go in once a year — on the Day of Atonement.

Many of the things in the Temple were symbols to remind the people of God, for example, the showbread, Incense, and candlestick.

Churches today contain symbols too. Here are some. Find out what they mean.

If you can visit a Roman Catholic church an Anglican church, and a Free church and compare what the buildings are like inside.

When Jesus died it is said that this curtain was torn in two from top to bottom. Look this up in Matthew 27 verses 50-51a.
Make a calendar showing festivals and special days in this country. Include Christmas, New Year's Day, Lent, Good Friday, Easter Sunday, Whitsuntide and Harvest Festival. Special days might include Pancake Day or Shrove Tuesday, Guy Fawkes Night or Bonfire Night, and the day of your patron saint.

Holidays began as holy days. Make an exhibition showing Jewish and Christian holy days. Choose a symbol to show the meaning of each festival and use drawings, models, newspaper reports, tape-recorded plays.
Synagogues

When the first Temple was destroyed in 587 BC, many Jews were taken to Babylon. There they began to meet together on the Sabbath (which is our Saturday) to listen to the Law and to pray. At first they met in homes, but later on special buildings were erected. These were called synagogues — a word which comes from a Greek word meaning 'gathering together'.

As time went by each town or village had its own synagogue. They were often built on the highest part of the town. Any place where there were ten or more male Jews could have a synagogue. At the time of Jesus there were nearly 500 synagogues in Jerusalem alone. Synagogues today are found in many parts of the world and Jewish people go there to worship every Saturday and on special festivals.

This is what a synagogue probably looked like in the time of Jesus.

Compared with the Temple synagogues were usually very simple buildings. There were benches for the congregation and in the centre at the front, a wooden platform with a pulpit or reading desk. The most important piece of furniture in the synagogue was a large chest called the Ark, in which scrolls of Scripture were kept. The Ark was hidden behind curtains.

Horns and trumpets, used on special festivals and for calling the people to worship, were also kept in the Ark.

Ruins of an old Synagogue, Capernaum

In front of the Ark a lamp burned continuously, this is called the Everlasting Light. Look in Psalms 119, verse 105, to find out the significance of this lamp.

If there is a synagogue in your area try to visit it. You may be able to go to a service there.
People were called to worship in the synagogue by a man standing on the flat roof blowing a silver trumpet. The synagogue was opened three times a day at the traditional hours of prayer. There were services morning and evening on the Sabbath, and there were also services on market days (Monday and Thursday) and at the times of the religious festivals.

Everyone attended the synagogue, but only the men were allowed to sit in the central part, and formed the congregation. The women and children watched from a screened gallery. Special seats near the Ark were reserved for rich and important people.

The general oversight of the synagogue was in the hands of a group of elders, or rulers, who appointed a chief ruler, or president. The president was an important person in the town and village and very much respected. He arranged the services and asked suitable people to read the Scriptures and to preach.

The president of the synagogue was assisted by an attendant. The attendant was responsible for the cleaning and lighting of the building, looking after the sacred scrolls and blowing the trumpet to call the people to worship.

One day a president of the synagogue sought out Jesus in a great crowd of people. What did he ask? Jesus to do? Read Luke 8, verses 40-42 and 49-56. You could act the story with some friends or draw a picture of it.

The synagogue service consisted of prayers and readings from the Law and the Prophets. The Prophets were always read in Hebrew and were then translated into the language of the people, Aramaic or Greek. After the reading a person, invited by the president, gave a talk or a sermon.

There were no sacrifices offered at the synagogue.

Read in Luke 4, verses 16-22 about a time when Jesus visited the synagogue in the town where he was brought up and notice from which book of the Bible he read.
**Synagogue School**

Simon and Sarah are twins. Simon has just started to attend the elementary school.

Sarah stays with her mother and is beginning to learn how to run the home, to sew and to weave and to look after little Thomas.

As she will never go to school she will probably never learn to read or write, but her mother has been teaching her about their religion.

Simon's schoolroom is attached to the synagogue. Over the door is written some Hebrew. Before entering the schoolroom in the morning Simon removes his shoes and these are placed at the back of the room. He keeps his hat on.

The children sit cross-legged on the floor in a semi-circle round the teacher. The teacher is called the Hazan. He is an important person in the synagogue and guards the sacred books. For more than 25 boys another teacher will be appointed.

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**Language**

In the time of Jesus the Jews spoke Aramaic in daily life.

Read some words of Jesus in Aramaic in Mark's Gospel, chapter 5, verse 41 and chapter 15 verse 34. Write down the Aramaic words with their meanings.

The Old Testament was written in Hebrew. To read the scriptures children had to learn Hebrew. This language is written from the right-hand side of the page to the left. There are no vowels — a, e, i, o, u — in the written words.

Ask your neighbour to write a sentence leaving but all the vowels and try to read it. If it were written in a foreign language it would be even more difficult.

Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one

Hebrew text and translation
From the air Palestine looks like this. You could copy this map, drawing in little towns where the names are.
The Feast of Passover

or The Feast of Unleavened Bread

The Passover Festival is a very cheerful time which lasts for eight days. The Feast of the Passover began as the Spring Festival when the people thanked God and gave him the first new lambs and the first of the barley harvest.

When the Jewish housewife made bread she used leaven to make the dough rise. Each time she made bread, she saved a small lump of the leavened dough to use as leaven in her next baking. Once a year, at the time of the barley harvest in the spring, all the old leavened dough was thrown out. New leaven was made from the new barley crop.

The ancestors of the Jews were shepherds. Come wandered with their flocks into Egypt where there was plenty of food and water for the animals. They settled there and became prosperous. After a while, the Egyptians became afraid that the Israelites might become so rich that they would rule the country. They made the Israelites their slaves.

The Israelites longed to return to their own land, Canaan. After more than four hundred years of slavery, Moses led them from Egypt back to Canaan. The Jews believed that God helped the Israelites to escape from Egypt and guided them on the long journey through the wilderness. They believed God gave them laws which were rules for living.

The exciting story of the escape from Egypt is still told by Jewish fathers to their children each year at the Passover Festival.

Preparing for Passover

In the week before the Passover Festival, Jewish women clean the house thoroughly. All the leaven is thrown out, and all the utensils used in making the bread are removed from the house. Unleavened bread is made and eaten during the eight days of the festival. It looks like thin, dry biscuits. Leaven makes the dough rise so that the bread is light in texture and soft to eat.

Ask an adult if you may help to make some bread. Today we buy yeast to use for leaven. The yeast makes the dough rise. Try making some unleavened bread. Leave the yeast out of the bread recipe; make the dough into flat, circular pieces for baking.

The night before the Passover, the Jewish father goes round the house with a light, making sure that all the leaven has been thrown away. Often the children help him.

In biblical times, four days before the festival the father chose the Passover lamb. It had to be under a year old and perfect.

On the afternoon before the festival the temple was crowded with pilgrims who had come to present their Passover lamb to sacrifice. As the blood of the lamb was poured onto the altar by the priest, the temple trumpets sounded and the choir sang the Psalms. Part of the lamb was kept by the priests, but the remainder was taken home and carefully roasted over a fire.
The Passover meal

At sunset the Passover meal began. All the family gathered for the meal — uncles and aunts, cousins and grandparents. Usually ten to twenty people were there. Everyone wore their best clothes. Father had a bag packed to show the Jews were ready for a long journey.

Father read from the scrolls of scriptures. Then the youngest child asked, 'Why do we have this service?' By question and answer, the family heard again the early history of the Jews, how the Passover festival began, and what it meant.

Nowadays the Passover meal consists of lamb, unleavened bread, bitter herbs and wine.

The unleavened bread reminds the family that the Israelites left Egypt in such haste that there was no time for ordinary leavened bread to rise. The bitter herbs remind them of the years of bitter suffering at the hands of the Egyptians. A bowl of salt water is placed on the table to remind them of the tears of the slaves in Egypt.

Like the Jews, many people now have special food to remind them of important events. Hot cross buns are spicy buns which are eaten on Good Friday. The cross marked on the top of the bun reminds people that Good Friday is the day when Jesus was put to death on the cross.

On Easter Sunday, the friends of Jesus discovered that he had risen from the dead, and was alive in the world. Easter Sunday is a time when Christians are glad and happy that Jesus is alive. We give chocolate Easter eggs. The chicken inside an egg reminds us of new life.

The last meal that Jesus shared with his disciples was the Passover meal. He made special arrangements so that a room would be available where their Passover meal could be prepared. Read Mark 14 Verses 12-16.

Jesus said that the bread and wine used at this meal would remind people of him. Christians remember those words of Jesus and have bread and wine at their service of Holy Communion.

An Egyptian Pharaoh

During the meal, the family said Psalm 114 together. Read this psalm which is a song about the escape from Egypt and the journey into Canaan.

After more than four hundred years of slavery in Egypt, the Israelites begged the Egyptian King, Pharaoh, to allow them to return to their own land. Pharaoh refused to let them go. They believed that God told each Israelite family to kill a lamb and smear the doorpost of their house with its blood. 'At midnight I will pass through the land and kill every first-born child and beast,' God said, 'but when I see blood on the doorpost of a house I shall pass over it.' When the Egyptians discovered that the oldest son in every family was dead, they wept. Then Pharaoh urged the Israelites to leave Egypt as hastily as possible.
The Sabbath Day

The Jewish Sabbath was the seventh day of the week. Long before Bible times, people in the Middle East worked for six days and then rested for a day. The earliest people in the Bible made the day of rest into a special day when they thanked God for his goodness to them.

The earliest story in the Bible about the creation of the world is in Genesis. Read Genesis 2, verses 1-3. The Ten Commandments included instructions for keeping the Sabbath Day. Discover what they were in Exodus 20, verses 8-11.

The rules of the Sabbath were taken very seriously. When Jesus healed a man on the Sabbath, the Pharisees accused Jesus of working. Read Luke 6, verses 6-11, and act the scene.

Which of the following people must work on Sunday, our Holy Day? Nurse, train-driver, newspaper reporter, farmer, shop-keeper, milkman, policeman, garage mechanic.

Christian countries have Sunday as their Holy Day or day of rest. The early Christians were Jews who observed the Jewish Sabbath Day. They also kept Sunday as a day of worship, because they wished to remember the first Easter Sunday.

The Jewish Sabbath lasted from sunset on Friday to sunset on Saturday. It was a day of rest and prayer. All the food for the day of rest had to be cooked during the daylight hours of Friday because no work of any kind was allowed on the Sabbath.

As soon as the trumpet sounded to announce the Sabbath Day, the oil lamp was lit and the family gathered together for a meal. They said prayers together, and then father told the children stories from the Scriptures.

The following morning, the whole family went to the synagogue for the Sabbath day worship. The men and boys over twelve years of age went into the main part of the synagogue and took part in the worship. Women and children watched from an upstairs gallery. Read about worship in the synagogue in the book Places of Worship in this series.

After the Friday evening meal, Jews did not eat until they had been to the synagogue on Saturday morning. Jesus and his friends were hungry one Sabbath morning. Read Mark 2, verses 23-34 and 27. Religious Jews said that plucking ears of corn was work and to do it was forbidden on the Sabbath.

The Jews were very careful to follow the rules of Sabbath rest. They could not light a fire or comb their hair; a walk of more than 2½ kilometres was forbidden; children could not run or skip; it was forbidden to carry anything that weighed more than a few grams or to write anything down.

When the trumpets sounded at sunset, everyone stopped whatever they were doing, washed their hands and said a prayer of thanks to God for the Sabbath day.
In early Old Testament times most people were peasant farmers and used the donkey for transport and for carrying their goods.

At the time of Jesus, even the poorest family had a donkey. The donkey was of a big, strong breed, with a pale creamy grey coat. There were rules about feeding the donkey and about the load it was allowed to carry. It could travel up to 40Km. a day and was good at travelling up narrow stony paths and in the hills.

Jews rarely used horses. The horse was not as useful as the donkey. It was scarcely ever ridden but used to pull chariots and carriages. In Old Testament times horses were used for war chariots and for pulling the king along. But the chariot wheels often got stuck in the mud.

In New Testament times horses were most frequently seen ridden by Roman soldiers.

Most camels belonged to merchants travelling across the deserts from Arabia and Mesopotamia. A camel could carry heavy loads—500 kilogrammes (about half a ton) and was speedy, covering between 40 and 50 Km. a day when fully loaded. It lived a long time and could go for days without needing food, because its hump is a reserve of fat. It could also provide milk. But it was expensive to buy, and it was bad-tempered and rather stupid.

Families in Palestine did not travel a great deal. People travelled to market and to see their relatives. Probably their most important journey was to Jerusalem at the time of the Passover. Luke chapter 2, verses 41-42, tells of this journey made by Jesus with His family and friends.

From May to October the sun beats down, drying up streams and scorching the grass, leaving the countryside brown. Winters are often cold with a lot of heavy rain. The temperature drops very quickly as the traveller climbs up to the hills, and travel on the mountain roads becomes difficult.

A man would never go on a journey by himself if he could avoid it. Men travelled in groups and often had a guide. The heat of the sun, a lame donkey, and sandstorms were some of the perils of travelling, but probably the biggest risk was thieves. Roads through the hills were particularly dangerous.

You can read the story of a robbery with violence. The Good Samaritan in Luke chapter 10 verses 30-37. This road was the main road between Jerusalem and Jericho over 80 kilometres long and descending 930 metres through the hills.
The Jews were not allowed to go more than a short distance on the Sabbath Day, so long journeys were planned to start when the Sabbath was over. Clothing was important because, although the days were hot, the nights were often cold. If a traveller could not find a bed for the night he would sleep in the open air.

The wise traveller carried these things:

- A spare thick cloak for winter journeys or for cold journeys through mountains.
- A spare pair of sandals for dusty and rocky roads.
- A staff, in case of attack.
- Money, carried in a pocket in his belt.
- A book of the Law, put into his belt.
- A drinking flask if on foot, or a water skin if on a donkey.
- A scrip, a little leather bag strung from the shoulder for carrying food.
- A dried empty gourd, weighted with a stone, so that water could be drawn from a well.

Jesus told his disciples to travel trusting that they would arrive safely and be given everything that they needed. Look up Matthew chapter 10-verses 9-11 and find His instructions to them.

How do people prepare for a journey? What you take of course depends on the type of journey you are making. Write about a real or imaginary journey and describe your preparations for it.

On cold nights a man would ask at any nearby house for a bed! This seems strange to us, but the Jews prided themselves on making people welcome, even if they were strangers. The roads were dusty and so the traveller would remove his shoes before entering the house. He would be greeted with a kiss and then the householder or his servant would bring a basin of water and wash the hot, dusty feet of the traveller. Then he would anoint his head with olive oil which he poured on from a flask or a horn. This was very refreshing after a day in the hot sun.

There were also a few inns for travellers and merchants. They were cheap but uncomfortable and often dirty. The inn was probably just a large empty room where men and cattle were housed together. People often had to provide their own food and cooking utensils. The inns had stables attached.

Some inns had a few small rooms and provided meals. Only wealthy traders and travellers could afford to use them.

Travelling distances were measured in time, rather than length, e.g., a three days’ journey. A ‘day’s journey’ was the distance a person could normally travel in one day and would be about 30 to 40 kilometres if the traveller was alone or with one companion, and only about 15 kilometres if he travelled in a crowd. If he had a donkey he might cover about 50 kilometres in one day.
Fish

The Sea of Galilee was a good source of food for the people of Palestine. Fresh water fish were caught there and sold in market places all over the land.

Most of the fishing was done at night, and during the day the fishermen were kept busy mending their nets and cleaning their boats.

All the large hauls of fish were caught in nets, the most common being the large drag-net, which was thrown over the side of the boat and pulled in when it became heavy with fish.

The other net used was a large round hand-net. The fisherman either threw this from the side of his boat when he could see a shoal of fish, or he cast it into the water from the rocks near the shore.

Once the fish was brought ashore, the fishermen would sit down by the lakeside and sort it ready for the markets.

Any fish without scales or fins they would throw back into the water, as these could not be eaten by the Jews, according to the laws of Moses. Some of the fish they were forbidden to eat were catfish, skate and eels.

Most people ate a lot of fish; much of it would be salted down to preserve it, but some went to the markets to be sold fresh. To cook it, the fish was usually boiled in oil or water and eaten with bread.

Read Habakkuk chapter 1, verses 14 and 15, and you will find that these methods of fishing are mentioned. There are two on this page; what was the other?

Read John chapter 21, verses 1-13. You could tell the story yourself in one of these three ways: 1. Divide a piece of paper into squares and draw the picture in cartoon-style. 2. Act the story with friends. Or 3. Pretend you were one of the disciples and write a letter to a friend telling him what happened.

The fish was sent a long way to be sold; some of it went to the city of Jerusalem where it was sold at a place called the Fish Gate. Many traders gathered there to sell their wares to travellers from all over Palestine. Some of the fish was even sent as far as Rome.

Roes of the fish were sometimes pickled separately and sold in these markets, but few people could afford to buy them.
Sheep and sheep

Sheep, with their shepherds, lived in the wild, barren hill country where the soil was not rich enough for growing crops. Their search for good, rich pasture meant that the shepherds led a nomadic life, wandering from place to place. At night they slept out on the hills with their sheep or, if they were near home, brought them back to the sheepfold. The shepherd slept across the doorway to protect them from wild animals.

Even in the daytime there was the risk of wild animals attacking the sheep. The shepherd had to fight them off with a stone from a sling or, if at close quarters, beat them off with a wooden club.

Living out with the sheep meant that the shepherd had to be self-supporting. He had to carry sufficient food and materials for lighting a fire and for cooking his food. At night the flickering flames would help to keep away the wild animals.

The sheep preferred to drink from cool, still pools rather than rushing streams, and the shepherds were constantly searching for ponds and pools which were suitable.

Each sheep would know its own shepherd’s voice and come when called. The shepherd would not have a sheep dog to round up the flock; instead, he used a carefully aimed stone from a sling to startle straying animals and send them back to the flock.

If you live in a sheep farming district or have visited one, you will know how a modern shepherd and his sheep dogs know the sheep and care for them. You might like to read in Luke 15 verses 4-6 about the shepherd who searched for this lost sheep.

Sheep provided people with wool, skins for clothes, and meat for food. Lambs under a year old were often used for sacrifices and burnt offerings.

There was always an air of excitement as lambing time approached in the early spring. A successful time meant an increase in the size of the flock, an opportunity to give the first-born as a sacrifice to the Lord, and to be glad that the flock would continue.

Once a year, after lambing, all the sheep were shorn — their woolly fleeces cut off with iron shears used in one hand whilst the sheep were held with the other. During the hot, dry summer the heavy woolen fleece would have made life very uncomfortable for the sheep.

Being a shepherd was a dangerous job and Jesus told the stories about shepherds looking after their sheep. Psalm 23 is about a shepherd it was written by David when he was a shepherd boy.
Vines and winemaking

Vines for the grape harvest were grown in vineyards surrounded by thick hedges and stone walls to keep out thieves, goats and wild animals. At the corners were built tall watch towers so that the ripening grapes could be guarded by day and night. (See page 6.)

The vines were grown in rows with the bunches being allowed to trail along the ground, but once the bunches had begun to form they were propped up on forked sticks.

Fig trees were often grown among the trailing vines, which were then supported by the trees.

Harvesting the ripe grapes was a festive occasion. It was a working holiday for many people who came to help. They camped out in the vineyard. Grapes could be eaten fresh or, after drying in the sun, as raisins.

Although a good food, the grapes were really grown to make wine, a natural everyday drink in Palestine, for water was scarce and was not always completely pure.

After picking, some grapes were dried in the sun to make raisins. The rest were taken to the wine-press. A large pit was cut out of the hard rock, or a walled enclosure built and sealed with clay. The grapes were either crushed by the bare feet of men or women, or by a heavy stone. The juice ran out and was collected in large pottery jars where it was left to ferment for about 6 weeks. Then the wine was poured from jar to jar to remove the sediment at the bottom. The best wine was strained through a clean cloth.

After 40 days it was ready for drinking, although people much preferred old wine which was sweeter. This was usually kept for special occasions.

In the large earthenware jars it was difficult to carry the wine for any distance, so it was poured into ‘bottles’ made from goatskins. These bottles, like those of the water carrier, had a peculiar shape, for the skins, after being thoroughly cleaned, were sewn up and the shape was like the animal itself.

The wine continued to ferment, so there was a risk that it would burst the bottle. A new bottle would stretch a little, but even so a hole was left to allow the gas to escape.

If you have ever been abroad for a holiday, you may have seen terraced hillsides, vineyards and olive groves. You may even have been there at festival time when the grapes are gathered in to make wine. If there is someone in your class who has seen this, perhaps he or she could talk about it, or perhaps you could find photographs of it in magazines.

Jesus told a story about a vineyard. You could read this in Mark 12, verses 1-9. Ask your teacher to help you to understand what the story means.
When the Israelites escaped from Egypt and settled in the Promised Land of Canaan, many of the people already there stayed on. The Israelites learned new skills from them. As well as building houses and working in metal, they learned how to farm and fish in their new country. Seasonal rains supplied the water needed to enable crops to grow.

Three main crops supplied their simple needs – the vine for wine, the olive for food and oil, and corn for making bread.

Sheep supplied them with meat and wool for making clothes; the goat with milk, hair for tent-cloth, and flesh for eating.

Vines were grown on the terraced hillsides. The vineyards of rich people were walled round and guarded by a watch tower.

Olive trees could survive with little water. They grew on shallow, rocky soil, often marking the boundaries of fields, or in groves where they belonged to the inhabitants of a village.

The corn crop – wheat and barley – was grown in the valleys and on the lower slopes of the hills.

The many small farms were usually owned by the same family and handed down from father to son.
Ploughing the fertile ground in readiness
for the corn seed began after the period
of the ‘former rains’ of October and
November.

The wooden plough had a point covered
with metal, and was drawn by two oxen.
It had only one handle, and no wheels. The
ploughman carried a goad in his free hand
to prod and urge the oxen.

A farming law forbade the ‘unequal yoking’
— that is, using an ox and a donkey yoked
together.

On good soil, where wheat was sown, the ground
was ploughed after sowing to cover the seeds;
but on rough, stony ground it was ploughed both
before and after sowing. Where the hillsides had
been terraced, and there was not enough space to
use a plough, a man broke up the soil with a
mattock, a cross between a pick-axe and a hoe.

Another farming law, in the Book of Deuteronomy,
said, ‘You must not remove your neighbour’s
landmark’— piles of stones that marked the bound-
daries of the fields. Occasionally an unscrupulous
landowner would move several piles and enlarge
the size of his plot. Harvesting was by hand, using a
sickle. A handful of corn was grasped near the top
of the stalk and cut with one stroke. The first handful
was put to one side because farmers always offered
the first fruits to God to thank Him for the harvest.
The cut corn was bound into sheaves.

Have you ever seen a ploughing match? In some
country areas in England ploughing matches are
still held. Farmers mostly use tractors now, but
occasionally at a special event like this, horses
are used to pull the plough. If you have seen
ploughing like this for a picture of it, you could
describe it to your class or draw a picture.

Sowing seed was a skilful task. A man, carrying a
basket of seed in one hand, resting it on his hip,
would walk up and down the field scattering the seed
as evenly and as carefully as he could. This was
known as sowing ‘broadcast’.

Jesus often told stories about farming, because He knew that the people
listening to Him would understand. He told a story about a sower
sowing his seed. You can read it in Matthew 13, verses 1-8. You might
like to illustrate this story, either by yourself or with a group of friends.
You could use paint or crayon or maybe make a fabric collage of it.

There is a story in the Bible about
someone gleaning. Her name was
Ruth. Read Ruth verses 1-11 and
find out why she was gleaning.
You could act the story with some
friends, or make up a dance drama
about it.

Corn growing at the edge of a field and that
which had fallen to the ground when the
rest of the field had been harvested, was
left for the poor to ‘glean’. They waited
until they were told to come and gather
their share.
Threshing: the cut ears of corn were spread on the threshing-floor, which was a circle of hard, beaten earth. A 'threshing sledge', which was a heavy, spiked log or platform, was dragged round the threshing-floor by oxen, urged on by the driver. This weight, pulled over the ears of corn, separated the grain from the husks.

When all the corn had been threshed the next job was to extract the grain from the chaff and straw. This process was called winnowing, and was best done on a day when there was a light breeze blowing. Using a flat wooden fork rather like a garden fork, but called a fan, the mixture was tossed in the air. The wind blew away the chaff, straw and dust, allowing the heavy grain to fall in a heap on the ground.

Can you find out how a modern farmer cuts and threshes his corn? If you live in the country or on holiday at harvest time you may see how the farmer does it. You could describe it to someone who hasn’t seen it or show the process in pictures or models.

The grain was sieved to remove any small pieces of earth and chaff which remained. The clean grain was then tipped out onto a cloth. Finally it was placed in large storage jars.

Sometimes a flail was used in Bible times to beat out the grains of corn, but the process took a long time and was only useful if a small quantity needed threshing. A flail was made from two sticks joined together.

Make a flail and try using it. People who use them regularly can work up a good rhythm like beating a drum.

The grain, when it was needed, was taken from the storage jars. The grinding stone, made from two flat stones, one on top of the other, was put on a large clean cloth. The top stone had a hole in the centre which fitted over a peg in the bottom stone. On the outside edge of the top stone was a wooden handle, by which the stone was turned. A handful of corn was placed in the hole and the stone was turned round and round. The grain was crushed between the stones and fell on to the cloth as flour.

Read verses 9-18 of Psalm 65. Why is this often said or sung in church at harvest time.
Building a house

When a house was to be built in the days of the Israelites, an area was first marked out and cleared of growing plants, trees and shrubs. Any debris lying around, such as rocks or sharp stones, was removed and then kept for the walls. If plenty of water was available this was poured on to the site to consolidate the earth. All was trodden well, beaten flat with the feet.

What is the first thing that builders must do before beginning work on a new site today? Make a list of machinery that helps them.

In those days a carpenter would be approached early and asked to provide the door frames and window lintels, or boxes, and the wooden beams for the roof.

Many tradesmen work at a building site today and many different materials are used in the building of a house. Make two lists one of tradesmen – like plumbers – and another of materials – like copper, etc.
After the site had been got ready work started on the walls, using any available stones, the largest being placed at the corners. Spaces were filled with sun-baked bricks of mud and smaller stones. The narrow door-frame was placed in position, supported temporarily by long beams, whilst the layers of bricks and stones were built up on each side.

If you live anywhere near a site where there is building going on, watch how a modern bricklayer works. Most of our new houses now are built to a standard size. See if you can find out the standard size of a brick, of a door frame, and of a window frame.

As the walls grew higher, time had to be allowed for the soft clay mud being used as mortar to dry out. Spaces were left for the windows, small box-like openings in the walls. These were kept small to keep out the winter cold and the summer heat. If a box shape was not used, a wooden or stone lintel was placed to support the wall above.

At roof height came the most difficult operation. Long roof beams were laid across, resting on the walls, in order to take the weight of the flat roof.

Across the spaces between the roof beams was laid a layer of brushwood, branches and twigs of trees; on top of this came a layer of straw followed by a layer of earth. Then another layer of straw, and finally a layer of wet clay. All of this was firmly rolled to make a strong, compact surface.

The shape of a roof often has something to do with the weather. In England there are few flat roofed houses, and in Switzerland, for example, the roofs are steeply sloping. Find out how the weather can affect the building pattern of roofs.

The flat roof beams in Palestinian houses would be left exposed to view. Generally we cover ours with a surface of plaster or plaster-board. What is this covering called?

At the same time as the roof was being laid, the walls of the house were extended above roof level to form a low parapet. The house owner would need to keep a roller to press down the roof after the seasonal rains, when it would become soft and muddy.

There is a story about a man whose friends lowered him on a bed through the roof of a house where Jesus was healing sick people. You can read it in Luke chapter 5, verse 19.
A Hebrew law actually said that a parapet should be built around the roof of a house.

This parapet, with drainage holes, continued all the way round the flat roof, except where the top of the outside staircase came. It was meant to keep people from falling off, since the roofs were designed for various purposes — for drying corn, flax and fruit before storing for the winter; as a playground for children; and a place for meals and relaxation for the whole family. On hot nights many would sleep out on the roof top.

It would be exciting to eat or sleep on a roof top! Imagine you are a Jewish boy or girl living in a house like this. Write or act a story about having a meal or spending a night on the roof.

While the walls of the house were being built the outside staircase was constructed. It was made from flat stones and securely bonded to the wall, helping to give it strength.

The staircase would be useful for the workmen as they carried up the beams, brushwood and other materials to make the roof.

Some buildings in England today have outside staircases. They can sometimes be found on old school buildings. You may have seen them. Do you know what the staircases are for?

The door, hung on leather or iron hinges, opened inwards, and was fastened by a wooden latch, operated by a cord. At night a wooden beam was placed across the door to make it secure.

This simple door fastening would be thought very secure for our modern houses, with back and front doors as well as numerous inside doors. Count the number of doors in your house. The front and back doors usually have different types of locks and keys: who has keys to both these doors in your family?

On the doorpost of many of the houses was fastened a small box. Like the phylacteries which the men wore on their foreheads, it contained a small piece of parchment called a mezuzah on which were written texts from the sacred books we now call the Old Testament.

You could make a mezuzah. You need a tall thin box or a toilet roll centre, a piece of thick card larger than the box or roll and a strip of white paper on which to write the text. Cover the box or roll with coloured paper or paint. Copy Deuteronomy 6 verses 4 and 5 on to the white paper. Roll or fold this paper to fit into the container. Make sure the ends of the box or roll are fastened securely. Fix on to the card.

Do you hang anything outside your front door? At Christmas some people hang holly wreaths there; some people hang the name of the house there. In Scotland it is often the family’s name that is displayed. On your way home from school look at houses to see if anything is hung outside the front door.
The interior

Inside the Israelites' houses, the walls were covered with plaster, made flat with a smooth stone. A raised platform was built at one end. It was here that the family sat, slept, and in bad weather had their meals. In small niches cut into the walls were placed the bed rolls, the lamp, and other family belongings. On the lower level the farming implements were stored and the grain and oil kept in large jars for the winter. It was here that the manger was placed and the animals stabled for the night.

The most important animal to the family was the goat, with its long floppy ears. It supplied people with milk to drink and, in the very early days, with coarse black hair for tent making. Its flesh provided a savoury meal. The skin made a useful water bottle, or even clothes for a poor man.

Second in importance came the sheep. Again a multi-purpose animal, whose milk, wool and meat were used. The sheep, and particularly the lamb, was an animal often offered to God in worship.

Access to the platform was by centrally placed steps, on each side of which were the feeding troughs or mangers.

You will remember how Mary put her Baby in a manger. The stable in which Mary and Joseph stayed may have been the lower level of a house, which they had to share with the animals. Read about it in Luke chapter 2, verses 1-7.

Animals in the house nowadays are usually limited to household pets, dogs, cats, hamsters or gerbils. Make a graph of the class's favourite pets.