What were the Villages like?

The Jews of Galilee where Jesus grew up were essentially a rural people. The great majority lived in hundreds of small towns and villages scattered throughout the countryside. They worked the land, tended their flocks, practiced their trades, and seldom ventured more than the days journey from home. Many did go to Jerusalem, sometimes as often as once a year, to celebrate the Passover. And that was no small journey, up to 70 miles on foot. And then back again.

According to Josephus, a Jewish historian of the time, there were 240 villages scattered throughout Galilee. The average size of a village might be no more than a few acres, with a population of a few hundred souls.

Otherwise, the world was limited to their small village and the fields around it. Such a village might claim no more than several hundred inhabitants who lived in modest one-story houses of stone, covered with a kind of stucco.

The houses tended to cluster around a town square. In the square were some shops, and an open air market, and usually a communal well or spring.

Each town had a handful of local craftsmen, including the potter, weaver, carpenter, a blacksmith, and a shoemaker. Generally speaking, most of the men in the village went out in the fields to work, whether tilling, sewing, pruning, or harvesting. To be clear, life was a long, difficult struggle against the elements.

Most families kept small number of animals, such as sheep and goats. These were useful for milk, wool, and eventually leather and food. Most villages also had a shepherd or two tending village flocks on the nearby hillsides.

On many evenings men gathered in the village synagogue for evening services and study of Scripture. During the day the synagogue served as a school for the young men of the
village who learned ancient Hebrew and studied the Scriptures. At this time, the people no longer spoke Hebrew in general, it was a sacred language used only in the Temple and in the synagogue, much like Latin was for the Catholic Church until recently. Most villagers, who also knew some Greek, since the pagans around them had that as their native tongue, spoke Aramaic. The Jews of Galilee, also had a distinctive accent.

Villages often sought well-protected locations. This generally meant they were built on hilltops, rather than the long sloping valleys. Here they were more easily protected, and the best land in the valleys was also reserved for agriculture.

Larger villages called towns, might comprise some 10 acres or more and were often walled.

The streets were generally narrow really more like alleys. The homes that fronted on the streets, came right to the edge of the street, the walls tended to be at least 10 feet high, with only a few windows at the top. This is because one entered a home generally by walking into an open courtyard off the street. Whereas we tend to have front yards today, homes at this time tended to have courtyards, around which clustered rooms varying in size depending on the wealth and needs of the owner.

Villages tended to be small, because of the needs of each village to be associated with pastureland around it. Each village depended on both crops and the livestock which used the fields around and in the sloping valley beneath it. Further, each village clustered around or near a well or spring.

Each little village tended to be self-sustaining in terms of basic needs. Occasionally people would come from larger towns to provide specialized services. But generally, except for a yearly pilgrimage, most Galileans did not travel far from their village on a daily basis.

The little Galilean villages, were rather distinct from the Greek cities of the Decapolis which were built in Greek classical style, and which tended to be much larger, and more cosmopolitan. In a certain sense, the villages of Galilee were a world apart from the cities of the Decapolis.

Of the villages of Galilee, Nazareth was somewhat typical. It was laid out on a steep hillside, and at the time of Jesus, probably had no more than 300 residents. So unremarkable was it that Nathaniel asked what good can possibly come from Nazareth? Today it has some 60,000 residents, mostly Arab Muslims, and a smaller number of Arab Christians. Its streets are steep, and remind one almost of San Francisco.