

Jot & Tittle

A Journal Devoted to the Study of the Inspired Word of God

January 2013

The Synagogue in History and Scripture

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The synagogue played a significant role in Judaism during the New Testament era. However, there is no mention of the synagogue in the Old Testament. How did the synagogue system come into existence? How did the synagogue influence the early church? History and scripture both contribute to our understanding of the origin and nature of the synagogue and its impact on early Christianity.

The Origin of the Synagogue

The word “synagogue” comes from a Greek word that means to “bring together” and refers to a gathering of people or a place in which people gather. In its particular usage it refers to a Jewish gathering for worship.¹

The synagogue system seems to have its origins in the period of Judah’s exile in Babylon in spite of claims for an earlier origin. “Josephus, Philo, and, later, Judaism generally, trace back the whole system to Moses, but there is no evidence of a pre-exilic origin.”² The synagogue’s emphasis on teaching the Law of God does indeed

reflect an ancient practice (Acts 15:21), but the actual synagogue came into being during or after the exile. Bruce states, “The origins of the synagogue are obscure, but it is reasonable to look for them in the circumstances of the exile and its aftermath.”³

Suggestions that Psalm 74:7 refers to the synagogue are unconvincing since even the Septuagint doesn’t use the Greek term for synagogue in this passage.

More convincing regarding the origin of the synagogue is the hint in Ezekiel 8:1 that, during their exile in Babylon, the elders of the Jews gathered in the prophet’s house and heard the message of the Lord.

Later Ezra, leaving Babylon, settled in Jerusalem to teach the people the Law of God (Ezra 7:1-10). His influence may have contributed to the origin of the synagogue as it’s found in the New Testament era. Those who followed in his wake, sometimes called Scribes or Sopherim, may have further developed the practices that led to the origin of the synagogue. “There is reason to believe that the Sopherim organized weekly gatherings not only in Jerusalem but in the towns and villages round about at which the Torah was publicly read and explanations of it given. It would be a mistake to think of these gatherings in terms of the Synagogue services which subsequently grew up and spread rapidly throughout Jerusalem and the Dispersion, but they undoubtedly prepared the way for them, and to the Sopherim and their successors is due much of the credit for the development of this vitally important institution within Judaism.”⁴ By the beginning of the New Testament era the synagogue system was fully functioning throughout Judea, Galilee, and the Jewish communities throughout the Roman Empire and beyond.

Elements of Worship in the Synagogue

In order for a community to form a synagogue there had to be at least ten male Jews present. “In the post-Talmudic period it

was required that a synagogue should be built wherever *ten* Israelites were dwelling together. In the larger towns there was a considerable number of synagogues, e.g., in Jerusalem, Alexandria, and Rome.”⁵ In addition to the elders, each synagogue would have “rulers” who would preside over worship (Luke 8:49; 13:14; Acts 13:15; 18:8, 17).

Worship in the synagogue centered on the reading and explanation of the Law and the Prophets.

The Law was read through consecutively—according to a yearly cycle in the synagogues east of Palestine, according to a triennial cycle in the lands farther west. In Palestine and the east the reading of the Hebrew text was accompanied by an oral rendering (a *targum*) in Aramaic; in the Greek-speaking provinces of the west the Greek version popularly called the Septuagint was used. The lesson from the Pentateuch was followed each Sabbath by a lesson from the Prophets (a *hapharah*); the prophetic lessons, however, were not read in consecutive order, but each of them was chosen because of some link with the appointed Pentateuchal lesson.⁶

In addition to readings, explanations, and exhortations, synagogue worship included prayers and offerings. “A synagogue service at this time began with the call to worship and the recitation of the Shema and associated benedictions, together with the Decalogue; it continued with the appointed prayers and benedictions, the reading of the law and the prophets, a ‘word of exhortation’ or exposition, and concluded with a blessing.”⁷ Because the early church had its roots in the Jewish synagogue it’s not surprising to find that Christian worship includes many of the same worship elements. “Invocation, prayer, thanksgiving, scripture reading, exhortation, blessing have from the beginning been integral to the Christian liturgy, although the central place is given to the distinctively Christian ordinance of the Eucharist.”⁸ For this reason, Edersheim refers to the synagogue as “the cradle of the church.”⁹

Jesus, the Church, and the Synagogue

Jesus grew up within the synagogue system of the first century and was at home participating in its worship services. He often taught and even healed people in the synagogues (Matthew 4:23; 9:35; 12:9; 13:54; Luke 4:16-21; John 6:59; 18:20). He also challenged the hypocritical practices that took place in the synagogue (Matthew 6:2, 5; 23:6). Paul, following his conversion, used his status as a Pharisee to provide access to speak in the synagogues during his missionary travels (Acts 9:20; 13:5; 14:1; 17:2; 18:4). Those who believed in Jesus were often ejected from the synagogue. The church increasingly took on its own identity during the first century. James 2:2 describes the Christian assembly as a “synagogue,” probably in the less technical sense of the term, but this reference is a reminder that the early church had its roots in the synagogue system. Christianity is rooted in Judaism, but Christians acknowledge Jesus as the promised Messiah and Savior of the world.

¹ Bauer, Walter; Arndt, William F.; Gingrich, F. Wilbur; Dander, Frederick W. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958, pp. 782-783.

² Unger, Merrill F. *Unger's Bible Dictionary*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1966, p. 1053.

³ Bruce, F. F. *New Testament History*. New York: Doubleday & Company, 1969, p. 143.

⁴ Russell, D. S. *Between the Testaments*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965, p. 43.

⁵ Unger, p. 1054.

⁶ Bruce, pp. 143-144.

⁷ Bruce, p. 144.

⁸ Bruce, p. 145.

⁹ Edersheim, Alfred. *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1971, vol. 1, p. 431.