

CANADIAN SOUTHERN BAPTIST SEMINARY

SYNAGOGUE WORSHIP: ITS ORIGINS

SUBMITTED TO DR. BILBO BAGGINS

FOR THE CLASS

ADVENTURES IN MIDDLE EARTH

2B1111

BY

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AUGUST 28, 2017

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There is little doubt on a Sabbath morning when one reaches the climax of a Jewish synagogue service – it is the reading and exposition of the Torah, the five books of Moses. After the preliminary morning prayers and blessings, a special cabinet (the Ark) is opened, the Torah scroll is removed and marched around the sanctuary while the congregation sings. Certain appointed ones read from the Hebrew scroll the assigned Torah portion for that day, then the rabbi brings a sermon from the scripture passage, usually in the vernacular language of the congregation. This is followed by the *Haftorah* reading, a related passage from the prophetic books that will help solidify the meaning from the Mosaic instruction.¹ The scrolls are marched once more through the sanctuary and returned to the Ark.

Synagogue Origins

No one knows for certain the exact origins of the Jewish synagogue. The Greek term *synāgōgē* was used generally for an assembly of God's people for worship (Exod 12:3 in the Septuagint), then later in tradition as any local gathering of Jews, and eventually "synagogue" referred to the building.² Greek and Hebrew sources also used other synonyms for Jewish gathering places.³ The earliest mentions we have to such are of Jewish *proseuchoi* ("places of

¹ Joseph Telushkin, *Jewish Literacy* (New York: William Morrow, 1991), 653-54.

² Bruce Chilton and Edwin Yamauchi, "Synagogues," in *Dictionary of New Testament Background* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000), 1145.

³ Chilton and Yamauchi, 1145. Greek terms such as *proseuchē*, *eucheion*, and *sabbateion*, and Hebrew terms *bêt tepillâ* ("house of prayer"), *bêt midrash* ("house of study"), and *bêt kenēsset* ("house of assembly").

prayer") in Egypt in the 3rd century B.C., while "synagogues" are referred to first in the New Testament era when they were numerous and well established.⁴

Most scholars consider the concept of synagogue originating during the Babylonian exile even though we have no historical dates or evidence. The strength of the argument rests in the logic of the exiles needing some sort of non-sacrificial worship while living outside of Palestine.⁵ Exiles in a strange land, apart from their temple, probably felt the need to meet for mutual support, to read the scriptures, and maintain community. God's word needed to be preserved, not only as a written document, but also as a living word heard and studied by God's people.⁶

Especially after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in A.D. 70 synagogues became the focal point for Jewish worship and activity. Wherever ten Jewish males could be gathered (a *minyan*), a synagogue could be formed. The building was used as a place for prayer, study, sacred meals, gathering and dispersing charitable funds, legal proceedings, a general assembly hall, a hostel for Jewish travelers, and a residence for synagogue officials.⁷ But from its earliest stages its prime purpose for the synagogue was for reading and studying the Torah. Josephus stated that Moses directed that "every week men should desert their other occupations and assemble to listen to the Law and obtain a thorough and accurate knowledge of it."⁸

⁴ Louis I. Rabinowitz, "Synagogue," *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1972), 15:582. Philo (c. 20 B.C.-A.D. 50), Josephus (c. A.D. 37-100) and the New Testament mention numerous synagogues in Palestine and the Jewish Diaspora.

⁵ Donald E. Gowan, *Bridge Between the Testaments*, 2d ed. (Pittsburgh: Pickwick, 1980), 281. Ezekiel mentions a group of elders who met with him occasionally during the Exile (Ezk 8:1; 14:1; 20:1; 33:30-31).

⁶ William White, "Synagogue," in *The Complete Library of Christian Worship*, ed. Robert E. Webber (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1993), 1:131.

⁷ Lee I. Levine, ed., *Ancient Synagogues Revealed* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1970), 3-4.

⁸ Josephus, *Against Apion* 2, 175. The New Testament affirms how the Mosaic Law was read in synagogues every Sabbath (Acts 15:21).

Synagogue Worship

Synagogue worship differed from temple worship in that there were neither priestly rituals nor holy priesthood. The synagogue was led by a "rabbi," a term that eventually referred to a specific official priestly or ordained office, but not in biblical times.⁹ In the New Testament any layman learned in Torah and Jewish law and could teach could be called a "rabbi," a term synonymous with "teacher" (John 1:38).¹⁰

Synagogue worship today has developed over thousands of years. The earliest Jewish synagogue liturgy we have is from Roman times, and before the temple destruction in A.D. 70 the New Testament is one of our most valuable sources (e.g. Luke 4:15-21).¹¹ Our earliest records give these important elements: reciting the *Shema*, prayer (including the Eighteen Benedictions), reading the Torah (with interpretation), reading from the Prophets, a sermon, and priestly blessing.¹²

Ezra, the Levites, and Synagogue Worship

Some scholars have pointed to Nehemiah 8 for the foundations of synagogue worship. After the Babylonian exile the Israelite community had become watered down in their beliefs and had greatly assimilated into the surrounding paganism. Ezra sought to reestablish Israelite identity through teaching and reinterpreting Israel's story to this new generation as they celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles (8:13-18). As such the study of Torah became key to Israel's faithfulness, in fact, the key to their identity and survival. Every Israelite could and must

⁹ Robert Stagg, "Rabbi," *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Nashville: Holman, 2003), 1360.

¹⁰ White, 136-37.

¹¹ Ralph P. Martin, *Worship in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 24.

¹² H.G.M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco: Word, 1985), 282.

participate in God's redemptive history through hearing and incorporating God's truth into their daily lives. They had to reread God's word and emphasize their personal responsibility to participate in God's covenant with his people.¹³

Nehemiah 8 compared with synagogue worship shows some overlap but also a great deal of difference. Nehemiah 8 describes no *Shema* or prayer (except for Ezra's blessing upon opening the scroll). There was also no prophetic reading and no priestly blessing. Certain worship practices became common in later Jewish worship,¹⁴ but the main commonalities with later synagogue worship and this event are the reading and interpretation of the Torah (vv. 7-8).¹⁵

Thus, Nehemiah 8 probably does not describe a primitive "synagogue worship service," but several vital elements laid a foundation. First, the event *describes a worship gathering outside of the temple*. Temple worship required a holy space, a holy priesthood, and holy priestly rituals. Nehemiah 8 required none of these. Ezra was a "priest," but his function in this event stemmed more from his being "a scribe skilled in the Law of Moses" (Ezr 7:1-6). Ezra's event was a special occasion, not a regular gathering. Later Jewish tradition turned this into a weekly Sabbath gathering for prayers and scripture reading, worship done alongside the priestly ministry in the temple. After the temple was destroyed and the priestly ministry ceased synagogue worship survived and is still practiced today.¹⁶

¹³ Gordon M. Freeman, "Israelite Society in Transition," in *Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary* (New York: Rabbinical Assembly, 2001), 1352.

¹⁴ Such as unrolling the scroll and the people standing in respect (v. 5); Ezra's blessing to the Lord, the affirmation of the people (double 'Amen'), the sense of need and dependency (raised hands), and their obedience and bowing in submission to God (v. 6).

¹⁵ Williamson, 282.

¹⁶ White, 131-32.

Second, Ezra's event *describes a worship experience centered on the reading of the Torah*. The people specifically asked Ezra to bring the Mosaic Law and read it to them (v. 1). He stood on a specially constructed platform and read to them while the people stood and listened for hours (vv. 3-4). In most synagogues the entire Torah is read orally in a one or three-year cycle.¹⁷

Third, this event *describes the need for God's word to be explained*. Exactly what the Levites did is not clear, depending on how one translates the term *mepōrāsh* in verse 8. A common interpretation is that the Levites were "translating" the scripture from Hebrew into Aramaic, the spoken language of the new generation.¹⁸ Another interpretation is that the Levites "explained" or "interpreted" passages that were difficult to understand.¹⁹ Another interpretation is based upon the root meaning of the term *mepōrāsh* as "divide/separate," in the sense of breaking the text into smaller parts. As such, the Levites read "distinctly" or "paragraph by paragraph" or "verse by verse," enabling the sound to carry throughout the large assembly.²⁰ The correct interpretation of this passage may be a combination of these. Regardless, the meaning of the text was not self-evident to all, and Ezra and the Levites helped the people understand the Law. In a synagogue a rabbi brings a weekly sermon based upon the Torah reading, explaining and applying the passage.

¹⁷ Louis Jacobs, "Torah, Reading Of," *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1972), 15:1248-53.

¹⁸ Mervin Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1993), 226. This practice became common in later years with the Aramaic Targums.

¹⁹ Derek Kidner, *Ezra & Nehemiah*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1979), 106.

²⁰ D.J.A. Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 184-85. The Masoretes used a postbiblical Hebrew term based on the same root (*parasha*) referring to a paragraph of scripture.

Fourth, Ezra's event *describes the need for well-studied teachers of God's Word*. Ezra was highly skilled in the scriptures and was given the assignment to teach God's Law (Ezr 7:6, 25), and teaching the Law was a vital role for the Levites as well (Deut 33:10; 2 Chr 17:7-9; 35:3). The Levites roved through the crowd teaching, making the text clear to all (vv. 7-8). The people's hearts were pierced and they began to weep (vv. 9-10). Ezra and the Levites then taught the correct response to God's word in this instance, joy (vv. 11-12). People need capable teachers of God's word to help them understand it correctly.

Jewish history has drawn a connection between the ministry of Ezra and synagogue liturgy, and even though we do not have the empirical evidence it is not difficult to draw the same connection. It does not seem that Ezra sought to begin a tradition, but centuries of Jewish practice have followed his example and have made it one. Later Jewish tradition the gathering of leaders in Nehemiah 8-10 as an official body they called "The Great Synagogue/Assembly" that under Ezra's leadership met frequently as a ruling body and laid the foundations for Jewish faith and practice in the Second Temple period.²¹ One Jewish scholar has stated, "It can be assumed that the returned Exiles brought with them the rudiments of the institution to which they had given birth during the exile... (T)he establishment of the synagogue implies the evolution of standard forms of service, and the Talmud ascribes the formulation of the earliest prayers ... to Ezra and to his successors, the men of the Great Synagogue."²²

²¹ Wilhelm Bacher, "Synagogue, The Great," in *JewishEncyclopedia.com*. [<http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/14162-synagogue-the-great>].

²² Rabinowitz, 582.

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