

The relationship between Synagogue and Church has been a tortured one, to say the least. This may account for the fact that in much of Christian teaching the Jewish heritage and identity of Jesus is so underplayed.

In the early Church the Jewish believers were persecuted by members of some synagogues and then, as the church became powerful, the Christian community took revenge on the Synagogue. The church persecuted the Jewish community, a persecution which lasted for centuries, and included such aberrations as the crusades and the holocaust.

For many Christian Bible commentators, Jesus came to reject His Jewish heritage, the Law, the Temple and the synagogue. For them, Jesus is the replacement of the Temple, the Torah, Moses and a variety of other Jewish figures and institutions. Even the respected Evangelical writer John Stott writes that the idea that Jews still have a special relationship with God is “*biblically anathema.*” From a Christian perspective it seems that the historic separation between Church and Synagogue is still very much alive and well.

The Gospels give a very different account. Jesus is often pictured in the synagogue. In fact there are eight such accounts. In each instance, even when Jesus’ teaching is controversial, the impression that is created is that Jesus habitually attended the synagogue and so it was the most natural place for Him to teach formally.

**Matt 12:9** Departing from there, He went into their synagogue...

**Matt 13:54** Coming to his hometown, he began teaching the people in their synagogue, and they were amazed....

- Mark 1:21** They went into Capernaum; and immediately on the Sabbath He entered the synagogue and began to teach...
- Mark 3:1** Another time he went into the synagogue...
- Mark 6 2** When the Sabbath came, he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were amazed.
- Luke 4:16** He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, *as was his custom.*
- Luke 6:6** On another Sabbath he went into the synagogue and was teaching...
- John 6:59** He said this while teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum.

### **What is the origin of the Synagogue?**

Lost in time the origin of the synagogue has been much debated. There are two major streams of thought. The first understands the synagogue as a response to the calamity of exile and dislocation. This is the traditional idea - the synagogue developed during the exile in Babylon (587-450 BCE). The Temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed and the focus changed from the Temple with its sacrificial system to the Torah which created a need for a place to assemble. In other words, it was in response to the crisis that was precipitated by the loss of the temple and the sacrificial system.

Lee Levine (2000:33-34) suggests that the origins are not the result of some specific event or crisis, such as the exile, but as "a gradual development during the Persian and Hellenistic periods ... sometime between the fifth and the first centuries B.C.E."<sup>1</sup>

According to Levine, the origins of the synagogue should be seen in the city-gate as the focal point of communal activity in the First Temple period. The

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<sup>1</sup> Levine, L. I. 2000 *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years*. New Haven: Yale University Press

impetus for the construction of synagogue buildings is connected with shifts in urban planning in the Hellenistic period when city-gates were nothing more than a passageway between towers that served as fortifications of the city, leading to a relocation of the functions previously associated with the city-gate and the adjacent square to a building in the city.

No matter which view you prefer, the assembling of groups of people from the Jewish community that did not involve the Temple, or its officials, is a significant development which would inevitably exert its influence on the spiritual life of the community to the extent that it became the dominant force.

By the first century synagogues in Israel were ubiquitous. Today many remains of ancient Synagogues dot the landscape of Galilee and the Golan Heights. Jerusalem also had many synagogues that existed before the Second Temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 C.E. According to the Jerusalem Talmud in a saying of Rabbi Hoshaiah quoted by Rabbi Pinhas, the Roman emperor Vespasian had all the synagogues of Jerusalem destroyed:

"There were four hundred and eighty synagogues in Jerusalem and each of them had its own school, and seminary [a school, *bet sefer* (house of the book) for the study of the Written Torah, and a seminary, *bet talmud* (house of study) for the study of the Oral Torah] and Vespasian destroyed them all" (jMegillah 73d).<sup>2</sup>

### **The Synagogue heritage**

Sadly, the vast majority of Christians have never visited a synagogue. Those who have are often surprised at how like the average liturgical church service

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<sup>2</sup> Bivin, David. 1989 Synagogue Guest House for First-century Pilgrims Article: Jerusalem Perspective No 22 (Sept/Oct 1989)

it is. This should not surprise us. The early stages of Church history, particularly in Jerusalem, the believers in Yeshua remained in the fold of the Jewish community. It was not until well into the second century that the believers in Yeshua are thought to have left Jerusalem in obedience to Jesus' prophecy about the city's destruction. **(Luke 21:20-24)**

20 "But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then recognize that her desolation is near.

21 "Then those who are in Judea must flee to the mountains, and those who are in the midst of the city must leave, and those who are in the country must not enter the city;

22 because these are days of vengeance, so that all things which are written will be fulfilled.

23 "Woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days; for there will be great distress upon the land and wrath to this people;

24 and they will fall by the edge of the sword, and will be led captive into all the nations; and Jerusalem will be trampled under foot by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.

The Church inherited the structure of the synagogue in terms of its hierarchy and liturgy.

A president, deacons, a precentor (song leader), and teachers can all be found in both the synagogue and the early Church.

Rob Moseley points out the following similarities between the ancient synagogue and the early Church:

The principle leader of a synagogue was the *nasi* or president. In the Christian congregation, the leaders were still called *president* rather than pastor, as late as A.D. 150, by such non-Jewish writers as Justin Martyr.

In the synagogue structure, three of these leaders would join together to form a tribunal for judging cases concerning money, theft, immorality, admission

of proselytes, laying on of hands, and a host of other things mentioned in the Sanhedrin section of the *Mishnah*.

These men were known as the "rulers of the synagogue" because they took on the chief care of things, a title mentioned several times in the teachings of Jesus (**Mark 5:3** and **Luke 8:41**). This practice was still in use among the Gentile congregations at Corinth under the apostleship of Paul, where he spoke of the court within the congregation (**1 Corinthians 6:1-2**).

The *nasi* was the administrator of the synagogue, and we know that James, the half-brother of Jesus, was the *nasi* of the early Church at Jerusalem. Early documents such as the *Didache* suggest that the churches in Asia Minor and Greece treated the Church at Jerusalem with much the same authority as the synagogues did the Sanhedrin.

There also was a public minister of the synagogue called a *chazen* who prayed, preached behind a wooden pulpit, and took care of the general oversight of the reading of the Torah and other congregational duties. He did not read the Torah, but stood by the one who did, to correct and oversee, ensuring that it was done properly. He selected seven readers each week who were well-educated in the Hebrew Scriptures. The group consisted of one priest, one Levite, and five regular Israelites (**Luke 4:16**).

The terms *overseer of the congregation*, *angel of the church*, and *minister of the synagogue* all referred to the position of *chazen*.

There were also three men known as *almoners* or *parnasin* who cared for the poor and distributed alms and were expected to be scholars of the Scriptures. Since they were also known as *gabbay tzedikah*, it may be from this function that we get the modern term deacon. Some scholars hold that it was from these seven, the president, the ruler, the overseer, the *chazen*, and the three

*parnas*, that the idea of selecting "*seven good men of honest report, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom*" came about (**Acts 6:3**).

These men were appointed over the business affairs of the Church so the apostles would not have to be distracted from their study of the Scriptures and prayer.

### **Jesus in the Synagogue**

Rabbinic sources inform us that on the Sabbath the Torah was read aloud in the synagogue by seven persons, a custom that has continued until this day. Scholars have assumed the custom was the same in the time of Jesus. Prof Shmuel and Chana Safrai of the Hebrew University made a remarkable discovery: Only around 100 A.D. did it become the custom to have the weekly Torah portion read by seven persons. Until at least the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D., a single reader performed this task.

The lone Torah reader also read an accompanying passage from the Prophets, the *haftarah* (conclusion; i.e., the reading from the Prophets that concluded the public reading of Scripture). Usually, this same reader also commented on the Scriptures he had just read, in effect, delivering a sermon. Thus, just as Luke reports, Jesus read from the Torah in the synagogue of Nazareth, then read from the Prophets, and finally, gave a commentary on what he had read.

### **New Light on Jesus**

The Safrairs' discovery throws new light on several gospel stories, for instance, Jesus' visit to his own synagogue in Nazareth. Having become well-known through his healing ministry, when Jesus returned to Nazareth for a visit, leaders of the local synagogue invited him to be the Sabbath Scripture reader. They probably gave him the central role in that week's synagogue service because they hoped to learn from his sermon details of his activities. Since in those days the same person read the Torah, the Prophets and

preached the sermon, the leaders literally turned over the service to Jesus. The two Greek words translated “He stood up to read” strongly suggest that Jesus had read a portion from the Torah before reading from the scroll of Isaiah. One does not stand to read from the prophets only from the Torah. Jesus’ townsmen had received reports of his activities in Capernaum. They may have been skeptical of his ability to work miracles; however, it appears they had no doubts about his ability to read Scripture publicly and teach Torah. They were confident Jesus was capable of reading the sacred text publicly with precision and that he also was able to interpret it.

### **Reading with Consonants**

In Jesus’ day reading Hebrew was not an easy task—the language did not include vowel signs. These signs were only invented beginning in the sixth century C.E. A Hebrew word could often be vocalized in more than one way, allowing it to have more than one meaning. The way one vocalized a word affected the meaning of the text. To read correctly, one had to know which vowels to combine with the consonants of each word.

To read Scripture publicly was even more difficult. No errors, no matter how minor, were permitted. If a reader made a mistake, he had to back up and repeat the text correctly. There were myriad ancient traditions concerning how to vocalize the words of the sacred text, and no one dared read publicly without careful preparation.

Let us try to imagine what it was like in the Nazareth synagogue on the Sabbath Jesus read from the Torah. If Jesus successfully accomplished the challenging task of publicly reading the sacred Scriptures, by the time he finished reading and began to preach, he had gone far towards winning over his audience. As **Luke 4:20** says, “All eyes were fixed on him.” In other words, the congregation waited for Jesus’ sermon with eager anticipation.