

Doctrine of the Synagogue

Introduction

1. In the Greek, "synagogue" means simply "a place of assembly," though it came to be the technical name for an immeasurably important institution in Judaism.
2. The origin of synagogue is a matter of considerable dispute. Jewish tradition strongly suggests that the synagogue is at least as old as the time of Ezra, c. 445 B.C. The two most ancient synagogues were discovered in Babylonia, the oldest founded by King Jehoiachin c. 597 B.C.
3. I think we can safely conclude the synagogue grew out of a need made acute during the Diaspora. Jews banded together in the foreign land of Babylonia, and later Persia, to maintain their ancient religion.
4. In fact, there was a tradition among the Jews in New Testament times that Moses had established it. Most believe this is historically unreliable.
5. References to the synagogue in the Talmud prior to the time of Solomon's Temple do not exist.
6. The New Testament itself, with over 50 uses of the word synagogue presents the first coherent accounts of its weekly Sabbath services.
7. The synagogue was such an extensive and developed institution by New Testament times that it must have had a history of some length prior to the first century.
8. As early as the time of Caesar Augustus, there were many synagogues in Rome.
9. It does appear that there were synagogues outside Palestine before there were synagogues inside that land.
10. This institution grew to maturity and underwent its most important development during the period of Jewish history that falls between the close of the Old Testament and the Maccabean revolt (444-168 B.C.).
11. Psa 74:8 is considered by some to be the only specific mention of a synagogue occurring in pre-Christian literature. This reference, however, cannot be proven to be the word meaning, a place of weekly worship.

Psa 74:8 They said in their hearts, Let us destroy them together: they have burned up all the synagogues (Hebrew, "Mowed") of God in the land.

12. Wycliffe in his encyclopedia writes of the Hebrew word Mowed “Hebrew: mow`ed means a fixed time or season; like a festival; conventionally a year; by implication, an assembly (as convened for a definite purpose); technically the congregation; by extension, the place of meeting; also a signal (as appointed beforehand).”

13. The present Hebrew word for synagogue, Bet-Hakkreeneset, "house of the assembly," is nowhere used in the Old Testament.

14. The synagogue probably grew out of two basic needs: first, the exile in Babylonia, when it may be presumed that the Jews gathered together for prayer and to strengthen themselves and each other in their devotion to the religion of their fathers; second, the emphasis of Ezra on the law at the time of the restoration.

15. A possible clue for the origin of the institution in Babylonia is to be found in Eze 14:1: Then came certain of the elders of Israel unto me, and sat before me.

16. Although there is no mention of the synagogue in records of the restoration, the entire history of the return presupposes the habit of periodic assemblies of the people.

Ezr 8:15 And I gathered them together to the river that runneth to Ahava; and there abode we in tents three days: and I viewed the people, and the priests, and found there none of the sons of Levi.

Neh 8:2 And Ezra the priest brought the law before the congregation both of men and women, and all that could hear with understanding, upon the first day of the seventh month.

Zec 7:5 Speak unto all the people of the land, and to the priests, saying, When ye fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh month, even those seventy years, did ye at all fast unto me, even to me?

Function

1. Strictly speaking, the Temple was the place of worship in Judaism, while the synagogue became the educational institution, providing a place to study the law.

2. As the institution for the study and inculcation of the law, the synagogue was especially suited to the Pharisaic interest; and from the 2nd century B.C. onward, this institution was dominated by the Pharisees.

3. In practice, however, the distinction between worship and instruction disappeared. The Jews who lived at great distances from Jerusalem found it difficult, if not impossible, to worship in the Temple.

4. It was only natural that the synagogue, as the place of religious association and fellowship, should be adapted to the common need for worship; thus, this element became increasingly a part of synagogue life as expressed in its services.

5. For those Jews dispersed around the Roman world, the synagogue served as the civic center of the Jewish community and provided the schools necessary for the teaching of the young.

6. The atmosphere of this institution among the dispersed Jews soon tended toward the secular rather than the religious.

Requirements

1. Before a village or city could have a synagogue, there were certain requirements. The community must contain ten males above twelve years of age.

2. It was expected that ten or more men be present for each service.

3. In some communities wealthy men of leisure habitually represented the congregation at the services, supplying regularly the required number.

4. Evidently Philippi did not have ten such males to form a synagogue. The few followers of Judaism first encountered by Paul in Philippi met for prayer outside the city by a river. Acts 16:12-13

Acts 16:12 From there we traveled to Philippi, a Roman colony and the leading city of that district of Macedonia. And we stayed there several days.

Acts 16:13 On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there.

5. The larger towns, of course, would be able to support more than one synagogue. The Talmud tells us there were at one time some 480 synagogues in Jerusalem. Most agree this number is problematic.

6. There was no fixed size or shape for a synagogue.

6.1 Again according to the Talmud, however, it was required that the building be erected on the highest possible point in the community, the thought being that no building was worthy to look down upon this holy house.

7. It was also desired that the chest which contained the Scriptures, referred to as the "ark," should face toward Jerusalem.

8. The building was usually made of stone. In Galilee the synagogue was oriented on a north and south axis, with the entrance to the building at the south end.

Services

1. Synagogue services were first held three times each week: Saturday, Monday and Thursday.
2. Later, the synagogues located in populous centers held three services each day. The services corresponded to the times of the three daily temple sacrifices, the extra services being greatly abbreviated and consisting principally of prayers.
3. The main service of the synagogue was held on the Sabbath morning.
4. Prior to New Testament times it became the custom to conduct services on the great feast days for the benefit of the people who could not go up to Jerusalem.
5. The services on these festive occasions were substantially the same as those held on each Sabbath morning.
6. The order of the synagogue service gradually evolved. The earliest element in this development was the reading of the Scripture in the Hebrew tongue, followed by an explanation in Aramaic.

6.1 Note how Ezra read from the Pentateuch to the assembled people, making it clear and giving it meaning so that the people understood the reading.

Neh 8:8 They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read.

7. By New Testament times, in the Greek synagogues located in Samaria and Galilee, it was the custom to read the Scriptures in the Greek translation (*Septuagint*).

7.1 Paul, for example, quoted directly from the Greek version of Hab 1:5 in his sermon in the synagogue in Antioch of Pisidia. Acts 13:41

Acts 13:41 Behold, ye despisers, and wonder, and perish: for I work a work in your days, a work which ye shall in no wise believe, though a man declare it unto you.

Hab 1:5 Look at the nations and watch--and be utterly amazed. For I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe, even if you were told.

8. The reading of the Pentateuch at the public gatherings in the earliest instances was probably on the occasion of certain festivals.

8.1 Eventually, in Palestine the entire Pentateuch was arranged in portions to be read Sabbath by Sabbath, completing the whole in a period of three years.

8.2 Finally, there came a time when the reading of the Pentateuch was concluded with a verse or two from the Books of the Prophets.

8.3 It is not known at what period the reading of the Prophets came to be part of the service, but it was certainly well before the end of the first century A.D.

9. During New Testament times, a typical service on a Sabbath morning in a large synagogue would have followed an order as follows:

9.1 Since the synagogue was essentially a lay institution, any Jew could read, lead the congregation in prayer or, if gifted, speak to the assembly.

9.2 Jesus took advantage of this freedom in His home synagogue at Nazareth when He read from Isa 61:1-2 and preached concerning its meaning. Luk 4:14-27

Isa 61:1 The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me; because the LORD hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound;

Isa 61:2 To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all that mourn;

Luk 4:14 And Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit into Galilee: and there went out a fame of him through all the region round about.

Luk 4:15 And he taught in their synagogues, being glorified of all.

Luk 4:16 And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up: and, as his custom was, he went into the synagogue on the sabbath day, and stood up for to read.

Luk 4:17 And there was delivered unto him the book of the prophet Esaias. And when he had opened the book, he found the place where it was written,

Luk 4:18 The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised,

Luk 4:19 To preach the acceptable year of the Lord.

Luk 4:20 And he closed the book, and he gave it again to the minister, and sat down. And the eyes of all them that were in the synagogue were fastened on him.

Luk 4:21 And he began to say unto them, This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears.

Luk 4:22 And all bare him witness, and wondered at the gracious words which proceeded out of his mouth. And they said, Is not this Joseph's son?

Luk 4:23 And he said unto them, Ye will surely say unto me this proverb, Physician, heal thyself: whatsoever we have heard done in Capernaum, do also here in thy country.

Luk 4:24 And he said, Verily I say unto you, No prophet is accepted in his own country.

Luk 4:25 But I tell you of a truth, many widows were in Israel in the days of Elias, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, when great famine was throughout all the land;

Luk 4:26 But unto none of them was Elias sent, save unto Sarepta, a city of Sidon, unto a woman that was a widow.

Luk 4:27 And many lepers were in Israel in the time of Eliseus the prophet; and none of them was cleansed, saving Naaman the Syrian.

10. The service began with an invitation to prayer given as a proclamation in the words "Bless ye the Lord who is to be blessed."

11. To this the people replied: "Blessed be the Lord who is to be blessed forever."

12. This was followed by the confession of faith known as the Shema. Deu 6:4

Deu 6:4 Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD:

12.1 A better translation of Deu 6:4, "Listen, Israel, Jehovah is our plural God, Jehovah became One." For more detail see the Doctrine of Shema.

13. Following the Shema was a prayer.

14. A prescribed reading from the Pentateuch followed.

15. A reading from one of the prophetic books came next. In both readings an interpreter more or less paraphrased the passage in the vernacular of the people.

16. A homily, or sermon, immediately followed the prophetic passage that in essence was usually an exposition of the Scriptures read or a hortatory comment based on the same material. This on occasion might be given by a visiting Jew. Paul was often just such a visitor. Acts 13:14-16; 14:1; 17:1-4, 10; 18:4, 19

Acts 13:14 But when they departed from Perga, they came to Antioch in Pisidia, and went into the synagogue on the sabbath day, and sat down.

Acts 13:15 And after the reading of the law and the prophets the rulers of the synagogue sent unto them, saying, Ye men and brethren, if ye have any word of exhortation for the people, say on.

Acts 13:16 Then Paul stood up, and beckoning with his hand said, Men of Israel, and ye that fear God, give audience.

Acts 14:1 And it came to pass in Iconium, that they went both together into the synagogue of the Jews, and so spake, that a great multitude both of the Jews and also of the Greeks believed.

Acts 17:1 Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where was a synagogue of the Jews:

Acts 17:2 And Paul, as his manner was, went in unto them, and three sabbath days reasoned with them out of the scriptures,

Acts 17:3 Opening and alleging, that Christ must needs have suffered, and risen again from the dead; and that this Jesus, whom I preach unto you, is Christ.

Acts 17:4 And some of them believed, and consorted with Paul and Silas; and of the devout Greeks a great multitude, and of the chief women not a few.

Acts 17:10 And the brethren immediately sent away Paul and Silas by night unto Berea: who coming thither went into the synagogue of the Jews.

Acts 18:4 And he reasoned in the synagogue every sabbath, and persuaded the Jews and the Greeks.

Acts 18:19 And he came to Ephesus, and left them there: but he himself entered into the synagogue, and reasoned with the Jews.

17. The close of the service consisted of a benediction given by a priest if one were present, to which the congregation responded with "Amen" after each verse.

Synagogue Officers

1. The synagogue was controlled by a body of elders presided over by a "ruler of the synagogue," an **Archisynagogos**, probably chosen from among the members. Mar 5:22; Luk 8:49; 13:14 and Acts 13:15

2. These elders had the general supervision of the services and the building. It was the ruler who invited different members of the congregation to lead in prayer and to read the Scriptures.

3. If a stranger was invited to give the sermon, it was at the invitation of the ruler.

4. The only paid officer of the synagogue was the minister or attendant. In the modern synagogue this term is used for the reader or cantor. In New Testament times he had several different jobs.

4.1 It was his work to supervise the building and its furniture with special attention to the sacred scrolls. He blew the trumpet from the roof of the synagogue to indicate the beginning and ending of the Sabbath.

4.2 Sometimes this person served as schoolmaster to the young in the synagogue school. It was also the minister's responsibility to carry out any punishment, decided by the elders for a member of the congregation.

5. A fully organized synagogue also had officers called "receivers," who were responsible for the receiving and distributing of alms.

6. The recitation of prayers tended to settle upon one individual who became known, because of this function, as "the reciter of prayers" This individual functioned also as a secretary of the congregation, taking supervision of its necessary transactions with the outside world.

Furnishings

1. The early synagogues were quite simple. A basilica style of architecture was usually adopted, sometimes with two rows of columns and with one or more rows of benches along the walls.

2. Later synagogues boasted of elaborate mosaic floors and a frieze decorating the facade (a horizontal band at the top).

3. The portable chest which contained the sacred scrolls wrapped in a linen covering was separated from the rest of the room by a curtain or kept in a side room.

3.1 By the second century some Jews began to call this chest the ark and placed it in a "sanctuary" or permanent repository, reminiscent of the ark in the Tabernacle.

4. In the center of the room was a raised platform upon which a reading desk stood. The desk was used by the one reading from the scrolls.

5. Also, the preacher who delivered the homily sat upon this platform.

6. The men who served as elders occupied the "chief seats," which were benches arranged just below the chest near the reader's desk or on either side of the ark, facing the congregation.

7. A stone chair called "The Seat of Moses" stood next to the "ark" in which the Scriptures were kept.

7.1 It was the seat for the most distinguished elder, a symbol of the legal authority of Moses inherited by the scribes and Pharisees as teachers of the Jewish law.

8. The congregation was divided, with the men and women sitting on different sides of the assembly room.

8.1 By the third century a gallery reserved for the women was often built around three sides of the room.

8.2 It was fitted with a grill of wood so that its occupants could look down through it, but the women could not be seen by the men below.

9. The lamps, trumpets and other items needed for the services completed the few furnishings of the synagogue.

Importance

1. The synagogue, even more than the Temple, determined the religious life of the Jewish people.
2. After the destruction of Solomon and Herod's Temple, it was the synagogue that kept Judaism alive.
3. The importance of the synagogue in the propagation of Christianity cannot be overemphasized.
4. Jesus taught in the synagogues. Paul found a ready-made audience for his preaching in the synagogues that were scattered throughout the Roman world.
5. The order of worship and the type of service conducted in the synagogue greatly influenced the communal worship expressed in early Christianity.

Ruins

1. Remains of synagogues have been found at more than 50 places in modern Israel and Jordan.
2. The size and workmanship of the ruins indicate prosperous Jewish communities.
3. The largest and most elaborate synagogue of the Mediterranean world has recently been unearthed at Sardis, in western Turkey.



3.1 Dating from the late second century, the main room is a great hall nearly 200 feet long, with a broad apse or altar at its western end.

4. Much of that found in this doctrine has been taken from the *Wycliffe Bible Encyclopedia*.