

**SYNAGOGUE WORSHIP: ITS ORIGINS**

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FOR THE CLASS

**ADVENTURES IN MIDDLE EARTH**

**2B1111**

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BY

**KEVIN C. PEACOCK**

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**AUGUST 28, 2017**

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## SYNAGOGUE WORSHIP: ITS ORIGINS

There is little doubt of the climactic part of a Sabbath morning Jewish synagogue service – it is the reading and exposition of the Torah, the five books of Moses. The service begins with preliminary morning prayers and blessings (the *shakharit*), then a special cabinet (the Ark) is opened, the Torah scroll is removed and marched around the sanctuary while the congregation sings in Hebrew, "For from Zion shall go forth the Torah, and the word of God from Jerusalem" (Isa 2:4, author's translation). The appointed reader(s) read from the Hebrew scroll the assigned Torah portion for that day, and then the rabbi brings a sermon from the scripture passage, usually in the vernacular language of the congregation. This is followed by the *Haftarah* reading, a related passage from the prophetic books that will help solidify the meaning from the Mosaic instruction.<sup>1</sup> 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 modern-day synagogue. The Greek term "synagogue" used in the Septuagint meant an assembly of God's people for worship (Exod 12:3). Later, the term referred simply to a local gathering of Jews, and eventually it referred to the building where Jews met.<sup>2</sup> Ancient Greek sources use other terms as synonyms such as *proseuchē* ("place of prayer"), *eucheion*, and *sabbateion*, while later Hebrew tradition used terms such as *bêt tepillâ* ("house of prayer"), *bêt midrash* ("house of study"), and *bêt kenēset* ("house of assembly"), clearly revealing the function of the building.<sup>3</sup> The earliest possible mention of a

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

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

<sup>3</sup> Chilton and Yamauchi, 1145.

synagogue proper would be references to *proseuchē* in Egypt in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C.,<sup>4</sup> and first mention of a "synagogue" is in the New Testament era.<sup>5</sup> Thus, by the time of the New Testament, the phenomenon of the Jewish synagogue was well established.

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Especially after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in in A.D. 70 Jewish 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 being a local community center, the synagogue 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.<sup>6</sup>

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Most scholars consider that the synagogue originated during the Babylonian exile even though we have no historical dates or accounts. Exiles in a strange land, apart from their temple Jerusalem, probably felt the need to meet for mutual support, to read the scriptures, and maintain community. The strength of the argument rests in the logic of the exiles needing some sort of non-sacrificial worship while living outside of Palestine.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup>

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Even though the synagogue building served several functions from its earliest stages, the prime purpose was for reading and studying the Torah. Josephus stated that Moses wanted the reading of scripture to be central to Jewish practice. "Every week men should desert their other

<sup>4</sup> Chilton and Yamauchi, 1145-46.

<sup>5</sup> 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.

<sup>6</sup> Lee I. Levine, ed., *Ancient Synagogues Revealed* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1970), 3-4.

<sup>7</sup> 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).

<sup>8</sup> William White, "Synagogue," in *The Complete Library of Christian Worship*, ed. Robert E. Webber (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1993), 1:131.

occupations and assemble to listen to the Law and obtain a thorough and accurate knowledge of it."<sup>9</sup> When and how did this practice begin?

### Synagogue **Worship**

Synagogue worship differed from temple worship in that there were neither priestly rituals nor holy priesthood. Instead, this type of congregation was led by a "rabbi," a term first used of anyone in a high or respected position but by the time of the New Testament was used of someone learned in the Mosaic Law and able to teach it. The term eventually became used for a specific official, priestly or ordained office, but not in **biblical** times.<sup>10</sup> In the New Testament any layman learned in the Torah and Jewish law could be called a "rabbi," a term synonymous with "teacher" (John 1:38).<sup>11</sup>

Modern synagogue worship has developed over thousands of years. The earliest direct evidence we have of Jewish synagogue liturgy is during the Roman times, and for the period before the temple destruction in A.D. 70, the New Testament is one of our most valuable sources for describing it (e.g. Luke 4:15-21).<sup>12</sup> Our earliest records describe 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.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Josephus, *Against Apion* 2, 175. The New Testament affirms how the Mosaic Law was read in synagogues every Sabbath (Acts 15:21).

<sup>10</sup> Robert Stagg, "Rabbi," *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Nashville: Holman, 2003), 1360.

<sup>11</sup> White, 136-37.

<sup>12</sup> Ralph P. Martin, *Worship in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 24.

<sup>13</sup> H.G.M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 16 (Waco: Word, 1985), 282.

### Ezra, the Levites, and the Synagogue

Scholars have attempted to trace the origins of synagogue worship to the event described in Nehemiah 8. Comparison 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 no prophetic reading and no priestly blessing. Certain worship practices became common in later Jewish worship: 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); and reading and explaining God's word (vv. 7-8). The main commonalities with later synagogue worship and this event are the reading and interpretation of the Torah.<sup>14</sup>

After the Babylonian exile, the Israelite community had become watered down in their beliefs and had greatly assimilated into the paganism that surrounded them. Ezra sought to reestablish Israelite identity through teaching and reinterpreting Israel's story to a new generation. The Exodus story was rehearsed and reapplied to the new generation through celebrating the Feast of Tabernacles (8:13-18). Thus, the study of Torah became key to Israel's faithfulness, in fact, the key to their identity and survival. Every Israelite could and must 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.<sup>15</sup>

Nehemiah 8 probably does not describe a primitive "synagogue worship service," but several vital elements laid a foundation to the later experience. First, the event in Nehemiah 8 *describes a worship gathering outside of the temple*. Temple worship required a holy space, a

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<sup>14</sup> Williamson, 282.

holy priesthood, and holy priestly rituals. Nehemiah 8 required none of that. Even though Ezra was also a "priest" (Ezr 7:1-5), his function in this event stemmed more from his being "a scribe skilled in the Law of Moses" (Ezr 7:6). Ezra's event was a special occasion, not a regular gathering of the people. Later Jewish tradition turned this into a weekly Sabbath gathering of prayers and scripture reading, worship done alongside the priestly ministry done in the temple. It is possible that one or more synagogues existed within the temple compound in Jerusalem, a gathering where Jesus discussed the scriptures at the age of twelve (Luke 2:46). Even after the temple was destroyed and the priestly ministrations ceased, synagogue worship survived and is still practiced today.<sup>16</sup>

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

Third, this event *describes the need for God's word to be explained*. Exactly what the Levites did at this moment is not clear, for it is determined by 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.<sup>18</sup> Another interpretation

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<sup>15</sup> Gordon M. Freeman, "Israelite Society in Transition," in *Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary* (New York: Rabbinical Assembly, 2001), 1352.

<sup>16</sup> White, 131-32.

<sup>17</sup> Louis Jacobs, "Torah, Reading Of," *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1972), 16:1248-53. As a rabbi, Jesus was asked to do the *Haftorah* (Prophets) reading from Isaiah at the synagogue in Nazareth (Luke 4:16-21).

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

is that the Levites "explained" or "interpreted" passages that were difficult to understand.<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup> The correct interpretation may be a combination of all three. Regardless, the meaning of the text was not self-evident to all, and Ezra and the Levites helped the people understand the Law. In much the same way, a rabbi is expected to bring a weekly sermon based upon the Torah reading, explaining and applying the text to the people in their spoken language.

Fourth, Ezra's event *describes the need for well-studied teachers of God's word*. Not only was Ezra highly skilled in the scriptures (Ezr 7:6), but teaching the Law was a vital role for the Levites as well (Deut 33:10; 2 Chr 17:7-9; 35:3). The Levites served as roving teachers throughout the crowd, making the text clear to all (vv. 7-8). As the people understood, their hearts were pierced, and they began to weep in their brokenness (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.

### Conclusion

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 interpreted the

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

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gathering of leaders in Nehemiah 8-10 as an official body they called "The Great Synagogue/Assembly." Tradition states that, under the leadership of Ezra, this group met frequently as a ruling body that laid the foundations for Jewish faith and practice in the Second Temple period.<sup>21</sup> As 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.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> D.J. Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 184-85. See also Williamson, 278-79. The Masoretes used a postbiblical Hebrew term based upon the same root (*parasha*) referring to a paragraph of scripture.

<sup>21</sup> Wilhelm Bacher, "Synagogue, The Great," in *JewishEncyclopedia.com*. <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/14162-synagogue-the-great> (accessed June 21, 2017). Tradition ascribes to the Great Assembly: canonizing the later books of the Old Testament (including Ezekiel, Daniel, Esther, and the Book of the Twelve Minor Prophets); classifying the oral law (*midrash, halakot, haggadot*); introducing the Feast of Purim into the Jewish worship calendar; and instituting the Eighteen Benedictions (*Shemoneh 'Esreh*) into the worship liturgy.

<sup>22</sup> Rabinowitz, 582.

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<http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/14162-synagogue-the-great> (accessed June 21, 2017).
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