

Study 20: The Synagogue

Introduction

In chapter 13:14-16, Luke provides us with a very succinct view of Synagogue worship. Throughout the missionary journeys, Paul will go again and again into the Synagogues.

It is appropriate that we have an understanding of the Synagogues and Jewish worship before we venture further into the missionary journeys.

Body of the Study

The beginning of the Synagogue

The Construction & Layout of the Synagogue

The Worship Service

The Officers in the Synagogue

How the early christians regarded the synagogue

The Synagogue and God's Providence

Homework:

Read the notes as a review of the study.

- *What were the methods of evangelism that Paul and Barnabas were using in chapter 13?*
- *What are the practical ways that we can use these methods today?*

- *Read Acts chapter 14 in preparation for next week's study*

Notes for study 20: The Synagogue

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Body of the Study

The beginning of the Synagogue

The beginnings of the synagogue are hard to trace. The Old Testament makes no mention of its beginning, and the only reference to it is in Ps 74:8. The Mishnah makes no mention of the beginnings, but does give some discussion on the administration of the rites. Josephus makes only scant reference to the synagogue worship, and tells us nothing about the beginnings.

The lack of references in the Old Testament, combined with the multiplicity of references to the Synagogue in the New Testament tells us quite a bit about when (and perhaps why) the Synagogues were established.

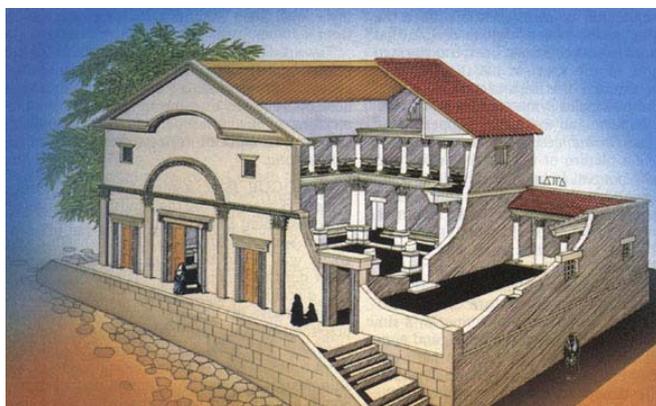
During the “400 silent years” between the close of the Old Testament, and the beginning of the New Testament, the synagogues had grown and flourished. The Jews had been dispersed from the land on several occasions, and were consequently prevented from worshipping in the Temple. At the close of the Old Testament, Ezra the scribe gave permission for the Jews to worship outside of Jerusalem¹.

Many Jews had been taken captive into Babylon, Egypt, and other places, and this provided a way for them to worship God, although it did not replace the Temple worship in Jerusalem.

Whilst we may question the authority for synagogue worship, remember that Jesus went to the synagogues (Lk 4:16-21), and did not condemn them as abominations. So too did Paul on his missionary journeys, and nowhere did he condemn them as he did the temples of pagan gods, – which shows that God gave approval to their establishment.

The Talmud gives the number of Synagogues in Jerusalem at the time of the destruction of the Second Temple as between 400 and 500, although many writers believe this is overstated.

The Construction & Layout of the Synagogue



The synagogues were lavish buildings, of which no expense was spared during their construction and decoration.²

A chest contained the rolls (scrolls) of Scripture, and there was a platform with a reading desk from which the Scriptures would be read. Lamps and the candelabra would also be common furnishings.

¹ Payne, Dr David F: Bible Timeline, Candle Books 1993 ISBN 0-9489-0281-7 p.8 – (However I have so far been unable to support this statement from Ezra-Nehemiah – nor anywhere else).

² Reese, p494.

The Worship Service

Sabbath worship in a synagogue varied from place to place, but generally included the reciting of the *shema* (confession of faith, Dt 6:4-9), scripture readings from the Law and the Prophets, prayer, thanksgiving, and individual exhortations (Acts 13:15). Some of the rites associated with temple worship were also transferred to the synagogue after AD 70, although not animal sacrifice. These places of worship were open to all people during services and they did attract some pious Greeks interested in the moral teachings of the Jewish law (*War* 7:45).³

The recitation of the “Sherma” was from Dt 6, and also from 11:13-21, and Num 15:37-41. Before and after the recitation of these passages, “Blessings” were said in connection with the passages.⁴

Prayers were recited, in a cycle of 18 prayers. The first in the cycle of the prayers is:

“Blessed art Thou, the Lord our God, the God of our Fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob: the great, the mighty and the terrible God, the Most High God who shows mercy and kindness, Who created all things, Who remembers the pious deeds of the patriarchs, and will in love bring a redeemer to their children’s children for thy name’s sake: O King, Helper, Saviour, and Shield! Blessed art Thou, O Lord, the Shield of Abraham.”⁵

Following the prayers, the reading from the Law and the Prophets took place. The interpreter would translate the passage into the native language of the worshippers. The whole of the Pentateuch (the 5 books of Moses) were divided into 154 sections (pericopes), so that in the course of three years it was read through in order.

After the reading of the Law, came the reading of the pericope of the Prophets. The translation was not necessarily verse by verse, but rather in paragraphs.

“Following the reading of the Law and the Prophets, the sermon followed, which was originally a casuistical exposition of the Law, but which in process of time assumed a more devotional character. Anyone in the congregation might be asked by the ruler to preach, or might ask the ruler for permission to preach.”⁶

After the sermon, the ruler or one of the elders pronounced the benediction. The congregation responded with “Amen”, and was then dispersed.

The first century historian Philo lived in Alexandria in Egypt. He tells us much about the first century world, and in his essay on *The Essenes*, he describes synagogue worship:

(81) Now these laws they are taught at other times, indeed, but most especially on the seventh day, for the seventh day is accounted sacred, on which they abstain from all other employments, and frequent sacred places which are called synagogues, and there they sit according to their age in classes, the younger sitting under the elder, and listening with eager attention in becoming order. (82) Then one, indeed, takes up the holy volume and reads from it, and another of the men of the greatest experience comes forward and explains what is not very intelligible, for a great many precepts are delivered in enigmatical modes of expression, and allegorically, as the old fashion ways; (83) and thus the people are taught piety, and holiness, and justice and economy, and the science of regulating the state, and the knowledge of such things as are naturally good, or bad, or indifferent, and to choose what is right and to avoid what is wrong, using a threefold variety of definitions, and rules, and criteria, namely, love of God, love of virtue, and love of mankind.⁷

³ Matthews, Victor H: *Manners and Customs in the Bible*, Hendrickson, Peabody Massachusetts, p260.

⁴ Reese, p 495.

⁵ Quoted from Reese, p 495, with my slight revisions of the language used.

⁶ Reese, p 495.

⁷ Philo on the Essenes, Published in "The Works of Philo", Hendrickson, 1993.

The Officers in the Synagogue

Perhaps the most prominent Officer who comes to our attention is "the Ruler of the Synagogue", who appears several times in the New Testament.

In some synagogues there must have been several rulers (Acts 13:15; Mk5:22). The function of the ruler was to take control of the worship within the synagogue, and generally to keep order. They would probably have been chosen from amongst the elders. The ruler would appoint those who were to lead the prayers, to read, to interpret, and to preach.

The elders formed the local administration. They were usually Pharisees. They had the local power of excommunication, and would often act as a Committee of Management.

The servants or ministers would usually be salaried officers, who would sound the trumpet to announce the arrival and departure of the Sabbath, look after the lighting of the synagogue, take care of the scrolls, and bring on the scourge when discipline was required.

Several other officers would be appointed as required, and may have been either a full time appointment, or an ad-hoc position that was carried out by someone delegated by the ruler (such as the person appointed to read on a particular day). These would include the delegates from the congregation, the interpreter, and the almoners who collected alms for the poor.

How the early christians regarded the synagogue

The synagogue was strictly Jewish, and of course, the early christians were mostly Jewish – especially up to the time of Acts 13.

Here was a place where the name of the True and Living God was known and respected. It was the place where the promised Messiah was looked for. It was the place where those who were trying to live as God's people, would have been assembled. What better place could be found for those who had the message of the fulfilment of God's promises!

Whilst it was true that Paul and Barnabas (in the present case – but later Paul and Silas) went to the synagogue to teach, they also went to worship. But remember that they were all Jews. The Jewish Law had been taken away and nailed to the cross, and the Shekinah had left the Temple. The effect of the Jewish Law had ended – it had become of **no effect!** But at this time the Temple was still standing, and the practices of the Law continued until the Temple was destroyed in AD 70. God provided a "period of transition" before finally taking the Law right out of the way in terms of both **effect and practice**.

Throughout the period of the New Testament, the writings are in this context (although some might argue about the date of the writing of Revelation – but it is not relevant in the context of this discussion).

We will explore these issues some more chapter 16, but remember that being Jewish was not just a matter of religion, it was also an issue of Nationality.

The Synagogue and God's Providence

We noticed that the Synagogues were not *authorised* by the Old Covenant, but not *condemned* by Jesus or the apostles either. When Paul (and we can assume the other apostles also) went preaching the word *into all the world*, the places that they began teaching were the Synagogues (if there was one). They had sprung up in the inter-testimonial period just in time to be well established by the time that the gospel was to go out. They provided the ideal mechanism to facilitate the spread of the gospel, and whilst many of the Jews rejected the gospel, there was (nearly) always some who obeyed.

God provided such a mechanism just at the very time that it was going to be needed. I am mind-blown by such an awesome providential God!

There is also another way that the Synagogue is providential. Whilst the purpose of the Jews was to prepare the way for all men (both Jews and Gentiles) to be saved through Christ, that purpose has been fulfilled. Yet God foresaw that *a remnant* of Israel would continue. Paul quoted Isaiah to show that this would happen (Rom 9:27; Is 10:22). The place of worship for the Jews was the Temple in Jerusalem, but the Romans destroyed this in AD 70. God allowed this destruction because the Jews did not recognise Jesus as the Messiah and turn to Him (Lk 19:43-44). Consequently He took away the primary focus of Jewish worship at the Temple. The Romans also burned the Temple, which destroyed the records and forever ended the ability of the Jews to be able to prove their lineage. The formality of the Jewish age was brought to an end by the destruction of the Temple, and the Synagogues then provided the place of worship, and are to this day the centre of Jewish activity.

Through the Synagogue, we can still see to this very day the remnant of Israel. This reminds and assures us that the things that we read about in the Old Testament are not “myths” (as atheists and some modernists like to call them), but are the facts that have been recorded, confirmed, and handed down that we can be assured of.

The Temple was a place of sacrifice, whilst the Synagogue was a place of worship. Sacrifices were not offered in the Synagogue. In yet another providential way, the Synagogue provided the (general) pattern of worship for the New Testament church. The pattern of worship described in the Old Testament is generally one of offering sacrifice and rituals by the *Priests*. But in the Synagogue we see the *people* are the ones who are coming together, are participating in worship, and are being taught. It is a big jump from the worship pattern of the Old Covenant to the worship pattern of the New Testament church, but that pattern was paved by the Synagogues that were extant and everywhere by the time of the first century!

What an awesome and providential God!

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