



Conducted by
Frank Worgan

This month, the question, which has been, asked concerns the Synagogue.

The questioner, a sister who has clearly given a great deal of thought to the subject, observes that whilst the Old Testament scriptures contain a divine command authorising the setting up of the Tabernacle system, there is no command to set up the Synagogue and she asks:

“Do Bible scholars consider that the Jewish synagogues had divine authority, or were they a man-made expedient to meet a particular need? If the latter, bearing in mind that it was the custom of Jesus to attend the synagogue (Luk. 4:16), was He endorsing, by His presence, a man-made expedient?”

NOT FOUND IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

In order to offer an appropriate answer to the question it is necessary to consider how and why the synagogue came into existence, and the first thing that has to be noted is that there is no mention of it in the Old Testament and nothing which suggests that God commanded its institution.

The only verse in the Old Testament in which the English word 'synagogue' occurs is Psalm 74:8, in the 'Authorised Version' (1611), where it is the rendering of the Hebrew word '*moed*', and simply means 'meeting-place' or 'assembly'. Later versions invariably and correctly translate it that way, because it is absolutely certain that its use in the psalm does not relate to the 'synagogue' which appeared in later times. After all, the word 'synagogue' is transliteration of Greek word '*sunagoge*'.

However, it should not surprise us, when we consider how important the synagogue system became to Judaism, that later Jewish historians such as Josephus and Philo claimed to trace the synagogue's origin back to the time of Moses. But there is no evidence whatsoever to support this idea and scholars outside of Judaism give it no credence.

THE ORIGIN OF THE SYNAGOGUE

The questioner uses the phrase, '*an expedient to meet a particular need*', and I suspect that she has in mind the period in Jewish history, over 500 years before the birth of Christ, when the Kingdom of Judah was conquered by Nebuchadnezzar, because it was the Babylonian Captivity which gave rise to the synagogue.

The policy frequently adopted by empires such as those of Assyria and Babylon, in their treatment of the nations whom they defeated, was one of 'assimilation'. It was a policy designed to destroy the national identity of the captives by dispensing them throughout the empire. The Jews in Babylon, however, effectively countered this move by establishing assemblies, which later developed into the institution known as the Synagogue. Since they could no longer meet the requirements of the Mosaic law, which decreed that priestly worship should be carried out in the Temple in Jerusalem - (a temple which, in any case, had been destroyed) - it became necessary to devise some

other means of keeping both their race and religion pure and alive whilst they were in captivity. For that purpose these assemblies were established.

ITS PURPOSE

This means that we may accurately describe the synagogue '*a man-made expedient*' for that is exactly what it was. But it served several significant purposes.

Firstly, the synagogue maintained the Jewish national consciousness and became the social centre for the life of the captives, so that even in captivity they never forgot that they were Jews.

Secondly, it promoted a renewed interest in, and respect for, the scriptures and became the place where the collective study of the word of God was conducted.

Thirdly, because it was no longer possible to observe the feasts, fast and sacrifices prescribed by the Law, there being neither priesthood nor temple, the synagogue also became a place for communal prayer.

So effectively did this 'expedient' work, that when the people returned to their homeland they took it with them and developed it, so that with the passing of time, the synagogue was accepted as a uniquely Jewish 'institution', and the synagogue services became more formal and ritualistic.

As for the buildings in which the services were held, these varied in grandeur and style according to the congregation's size and affluence. *Externally*, the buildings were not usually impressive, because in the Middle Ages the height of synagogues was restricted by law; a manifestation of the anti-Semitism which was fairly common in those days. But, whatever physical differences there may have been between the buildings themselves, they were contained certain items of furniture which came to be common to all of them and which can be identified to this day.

Since the Middle Ages, *the sacred scrolls* containing the Law have been housed in the '*Ark*', a kind of cupboard or chest, which is always located on the wall, which faces Jerusalem.

In front of this '*Ark*', there is the '*Perpetual Light*', symbolising the constant Presence of God, and which is said to remind the congregation of the fire on the altar which, in the days of the Tabernacle and the Temple, was never allowed to go out.

There is, also, the '*Bimah*', a raised platform on which stands a reading desk from which prayers are led, the scriptures read, and announcements are made. This used to be situated at one end of the synagogue, but in these days is usually placed in the centre of the building.

Incidentally, one may be forgiven for supposing that those who attend the synagogue have no problem in allowing their left hand to know what their right hand does! According to one rabbi, the *Bimah* is also the place where, '*acts of benevolence are made, in the form of donations, which those who are called up to the Reading of the Law are wont to make!*'

THE MODERN SYNAGOGUE

If anything, therefore, over the centuries the Synagogue has become even more important in Jewish life. Modern Jewish leaders teach that it is surpassed in importance only by the home, and, like the home, it serves as '*a training ground in Holiness*'.

Regardless of what changes it has undergone since the days of the Babylonian Captivity, the purposes it serves are still essentially the same. It remains:

1. A place for the study of the Scriptures.
2. A place of Worship.
3. A Centre of Social Life.

These three functions have come to be described as:

1. **Torah**: the study of the Law of God.

I think that it is a fact not generally understood by Christians, amongst whom

private study of the Word is encouraged, that Judaism actually *discourages* private or individual study. It prefers *communal* study and regards knowledge gained in the *synagogue*, where different views and opinions are expressed, as the proper method of arriving at a true understanding of the scriptures.

2. *Abodah*, or Worship.

Here, again, Judaism stresses the *communal* nature of worship, and displays what can only be described as a 'negative attitude' towards private worship, or, what is called 'worship in isolation'.

3. *Gemiluth Chasadim*

This *is* the term which describes the practice of benevolence and good deeds, and for this aspect of Jewish life also, the synagogue is considered to be the ideal place. The Jews describe this as '*social service*', because the synagogue has become the place where their leaders meet together to make decisions affecting the life of their community and where benevolence is dispensed.

So, we see that an 'expedient' which was devised in a time of national distress, eventually became an important institution in Judaism.

AN 'EXPEDIENT'

Let us now think about that word '*expedient*'. We must remember that although the word does not occur in the scripture, we should not confuse it with such words as '*unscriptural*' or '*anti-scriptural*'. 'Expedient' simply means '*beneficial, advantageous or useful*', and, for this reason, there is nothing wrong with the proper use of 'an expedient'.

If anything is adopted which is *not* in harmony with the scriptures it cannot be said to be 'beneficial' or 'advantageous', and therefore it cannot properly be called an expedient.

JESUS AND THE SYNAGOGUE

As for the Lord Himself '*endorsing by presence (in the Synagogue) a man-made expedient*' - (and there is no doubt that he did so *regularly*, Luke 4:16) - nothing that was done in the Synagogue could be condemned as a violation of the Law of God. Since the Law commanded worship, benevolence and obedience to God's Word, it could be argued that the Synagogue encouraged and assisted the Jews to understand and obey the Law. For this reason the Lord Jesus would have no objection to it.

OUR OWN 'EXPEDIENTS'

Come to think about it, there are many things, which *we* have adopted and use in the life of the Church today which are, in fact, 'expedients'.

The *Time* at which the local congregation decides to meet for worship on the Lord's Day, is determined on the basis of 'expediency' that is, on the basis of appropriateness and convenience.

The *Activities* which congregations arrange for themselves, in order to promote growth and encourage fellowship, are also 'expedients'. Where do we find the passage of scriptures which *explicitly* command the setting up of '*Lord's Day Bible Classes, Men's Training Classes, Ladies' Meetings* and similar activities? Where, indeed, are we commanded to publish and use a *hymnbook*?

All of these are useful arrangements - 'expedients' - designed to help us to do what we are *commanded* to do; namely study the Word, in order to be able to teach and preach, and sing God's praises. No doubt we could do all of these things without the use of these 'expedients'. For instance, we could *sing* without the use of hymnbooks, though I doubt we could do so as conveniently.

Yes! The Synagogue was a 'man-made expedient', used - and, by inference, approved - by the Lord, and I suggest that we should do well to adopt His wisdom and follow His example when proposals are put forward which are designed to help us to

work and worship more effectively.

A method is neither *right* nor *wrong* merely because it is *new*. The question, which we should always ask, is, *Is what is suggested in harmony with the Word of God, or does it violate, or conflict with, what the scriptures reveal to be His will?*

The answer to this question will settle whether a thing is truly '*expedient*' or not.

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