

The Synagogue Part 1

The origin of the synagogue
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When one is reading The New Testament (NT) the synagogue arises from nothing.

Jesus teaches in the synagogue, he heals in the synagogue and he predicts that his followers will be whipped in the synagogue, and even outcast from the synagogue. When Paul arrives in a new city, the first thing he does is visit the synagogue to preach. Since the synagogue is not mentioned in The Old Testament (OT), while it is referred to over 70 times in NT the question of “Where does the synagogue originate from?” appears. In this series/sequence consisting of four parts about the synagogue, we will explore the architecture, the financing, and the usage of the synagogue. Concluding with the comparison of the synagogue with the first Christian congregation.

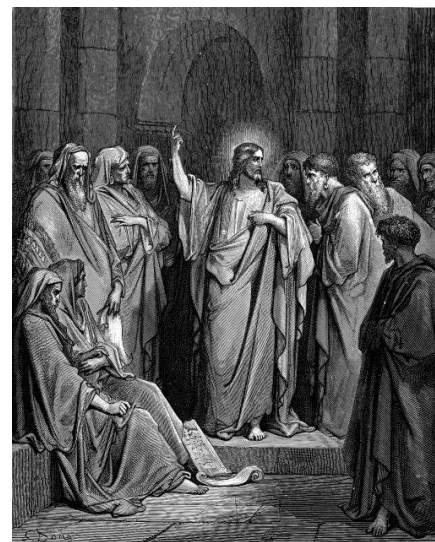


Figure 1 Christ in the Synagogue by Gustav Dore

Sources

The majority of knowledge of the synagogue comes from texts/manuscripts from the Hellenistic Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria who lived around the year 20 BC – 50 AD, the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus who lived 37 BC – ca. 100 AD, the Mishna, which is a collection of comments based on the Jewish oral laws that can be dated to the ending of the 2nd century and the beginning of the 3rd century AD and the Talmud that is described as a comment to the Mishna, which was collected and compiled from the 2nd century AD and to the Middle Ages. There have also been inscriptions found where synagogues are mentioned and a few ruins of synagogues dated to the second half of the 1st century AD. In addition to this, there is a lot of valuable information to discover by studying the over 70 times synagogues have been mentioned in NT, which an authority in research of synagogues called an “invaluable material”¹. Let us take a look at some of the examples from these sources, and we begin with the texts previously mentioned.

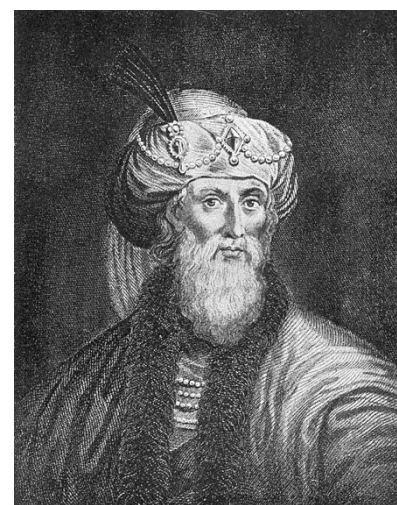


Figure 2 Flavius Josephus

Written sources

The following are just a few examples of mentions in the various sources.

¹ Levine (2000) p. 108

Josephus: “If some are convicted/arrested for stealing their holy books, or their holy money, whether it is outside the synagogue of the public school, that person shall be considered as a sacrilegious person” (Ant. Book XVI. Ch. VI: verse 2).

Philo: He [Augustus] knew therefore that they have houses of prayer [*proseuche*] and meet together in them, particularly on the sacred sabbaths when they receive as a body a training in their ancestral philosophy.” (Dreams 2.18)².

NT: “When Jesus had finished these parables, he moved on from there. Coming to his hometown, he began teaching the people in their synagogue, and they were amazed. “Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers?” they asked.” (Matthew 13:53,54)

Mishna: “And what are things which belong to that town? For example, the town square, the bathhouse, the synagogue, the ark, and the scrolls.” (Nedarim 5: 5C, D)

Talmud: “R. Pinhas said in R. Hoshaiah’s name: There are 480 synagogues in Jerusalem...” (Meg. 73d)³.

Inscriptions

In the book *Coniectanea Biblica New Testament series 39* (CB 39), Peter Richardson has made a table of over 25 inscriptions dated to the time of the 3rd century BC to the 1st century AD that mentions synagogues. The findings of the inscriptions have been done in North Africa in the area around the Black Sea, Syria, Greece, Asia, Italy and Judea, something that shows the expansion of the synagogues was geographically widespread. One example of an inscription is the *Theodotus inscription* that was found on the Ophel mountain in Jerusalem in 1913, dated to the 1st century BC – the 1st century AD. The inscription is as follows:

“Theodotus, son of Vettenus, priest and synagogue-president, son of a synagogue-president and grandson of a synagogue-president, has built the synagogue for the reading of the Law and teaching of the Commandments, and he has built hostelry and the chambers and the cisterns of water in order to *provide lodgings for those from abroad who need them – the synagogue which was founded by his fathers and the elders and Simonides had founded.*”⁴

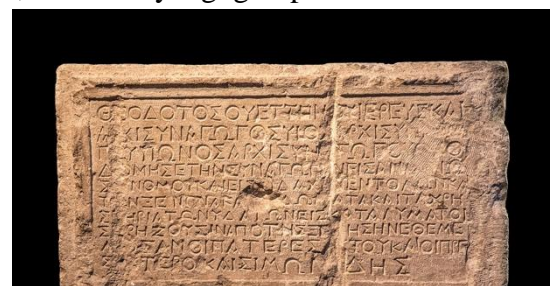


Figure 3 The Theodotus inscription

Ruins

² Quote from Levine (1987) p. 16

³ Quote from *The History of the Jewish* (1986) Bind II, p. 419, note 31

⁴ Biblical Archaeology, s. 240

Even though there are quite a few written sources about synagogues, there are very few archaeological findings before the 2nd century BC. There could be several reasons for this. It is difficult to know if a place was a synagogue, some synagogues have been in private homes. For example, in Mishna: “If I had known that [the house] would be made into a synagogue...” (M Nedarim 9: 2H). Another reason is that many synagogues were destroyed by the Romans during the war against the Jews in the 1st century AD. And in several places, there have been rebuilt modern buildings above which makes it difficult to excavate. As a comment on this problem finding archaeological findings, Steven Fine says, which is one of the writers in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Archaeology in the Near East*, in an online discussion:



Figure 4 Ruins of a synagogue in Capernaum

“The problem with 1st-century synagogues is that we may not recognize them when we see them, since they have none of the furnishings we might expect in later periods. A good example might be the Theodotus synagogue. Were the place where the inscription was found without an inscription?”⁵

In Palestine, there have been found ruins in Masada, Gamla and Herodium that several researchers have identified as synagogues and they are dated to ca. the 1st century BC. The book *Coniectanea Biblica New Testament series 37 (CB 37)* (p. 175) says about these:

“All of these constructions had benches along three or four walls, and pillars that were placed in-between the benches. The open area, the (empty) space in the middle, was the central place in the building. These buildings were constructed or renovated to accommodate a large number of people, meaning that they were buildings of public gatherings.”

In addition to the previously mentioned synagogues, there are also mentions of traces of synagogues among Capernaum and Jericho. Outside Palestine, there have been found ruins in only two places, Delos and Ostia which are identified as synagogues that are dated before the 2nd century BC.

The word synagogue

The word synagogue is translated from the Greek word “*synagoge*” (συναγωγή) which means “*a collected group of worshippers or followers/members of this kind of group – gathering, congregation*”⁶. The word occurs over 250 times in *Septuaginta (LXX)*⁷ and refers to all kinds of gatherings.

A typical example is Exodus 12: 47⁸: “*The whole community of Israel must celebrate it*”, only in one occurrence does it reference a building, a home, and that is in Numbers 16: 26: “He warned the assembly, “Move back from the tents of these wicked men!”. In this verse the word actually occurs twice, the first occurrence with “*congregation*” and the second

⁵ <http://orion.mscc.huji.ac.il/orion/archives/1998a/msg00315.html>

⁶ Louw-Nida ordnr. 11.44 (Bible Works 4.0)

⁷ LXX: Septuaginta Is a Greek translation of OT, that originates in the 2nd century AD

⁸ Brenton’s Septuagint Translation (<https://biblehub.com/sep/exodus/12.htm>)

occurrence with “*tents*”. Over time it seems that the word *synagogue* would mean more and more the actual meeting place of the congregation.

Josephus uses the word *synagogue* both in the meaning of *building*⁹ and *congregation*, and Philon does the same. In NT it is not always easy to know whether it is the building it is referred to or whether it is the congregation. But, in two places it is very clear that the word is referring to a building, one place is in Luke 7: 5 which talks about the synagogue in Capernaum: “because he loves our nation and has built our synagogue”, and it is said in the Acts of the Apostles 18: 7: “Then Paul left the synagogue and went next door to the house of Titus Justus”.

Proseukhe

In some of the sources, we find the Greek word *proseukhe*¹⁰ (*proseuch*) rather than the Greek word for *synagogue*. Does *proseukhe* then refer to a *synagogue*? It seems that the answer is yes in some instances, while that is not the case in other instances. In the two places that the word *proseukhe* is mentioned in NT, Acts of the Apostles 16: 13 and verse 16, it appears that it does not refer to a *synagogue*, but some kind of “*place of prayer*”. Luke writes “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” (Acts. 16: 13). There are several reasons that speak for this kind of perception, the first reason being that there were only women gathered there, which is not likely if it refers to a *synagogue* on Sabbath. The second reason is that Luke uses the Greek word for a *synagogue* in a later verse: “When Paul and his companions had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish *synagogue*” (Acts. 17: 1). This perception of *proseukhe* in NT is shared among several Bible commentators.

Among other F.F. Bruce writes in a comment to Acts. 16: 13:

“When Paul visited a new city, he did as we have seen, a habit of visiting the local *synagogue* on the first Sabbath after his arrival. Where he seeks the opportunity to make the meaning of Christianity known ‘for the Jew first’. However, it does not appear to have been a *synagogue* in Philippi ... However, there was a meeting place outside the city.”¹¹

Concerning other sources, *proseukhe* may refer to a *synagogue* in some instances. The book *Coniectanea Biblica New Testament series 39* denotes the use of *proseukhe* in Philon:

“Philo uses it only to describe a “*place of prayer*”, in the meaning of a *synagogue* in Alexandria and Rome.”¹² The reference book *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* says after quoting Greek inscriptions that contain *proseukhe*: “From the previously mentioned instances it seems that *proseukhe* = “*synagogue*”, but as Curtis (EXP VII. iv. p.454) points out not all *proseukhe* is a *synagogue*.”¹³

⁹ op.cit p. 151

¹⁰ Ifølge Louw & Nida ordnr. 33.179 (Bible Works 4.0) betyr *proseuche*: ‘to pray a place for prayer’

¹¹ The Books of Acts, p. 331

¹² CB 39 p. 151

¹³ *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* (1952) p. 547

The Expansion

The synagogue does, as previously stated, arise out of nothing in the NT as an established forum or as a place for instance reading of the Torah (the law). As Luke writes in Act of Apostles 15: 21:

“For the law of Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath.”

Since not every Jew returned from imprisonment in Babylon, but stayed in Babylon and other places in the Middle East and the countries around the Mediterranean Sea¹⁴. This led to the existence of synagogues not only in Judea but in many other places something one sees clearly in NT. Synagogues are mentioned in places like Palestine with *Capernaum* (Mark 1: 21) and *Nazareth*, (Matt. 13: 54).

In addition to these cities, it is said that there were synagogues in *every town and village* (Matt. 9: 35), in *Judea* (Luke 4: 44) and *Galilee* (Mark 1: 39).

In Syria there existed several synagogues in *Damascus* (Acts 9: 2). In Asia Minor there were synagogues in “*Pisidian Antioch*” (Acts 13: 14), *Iconium* (Acts 14: 1) and *Ephesus* (Acts 18: 19). There are mentions of a synagogue on Cyprus, in *Salamis* (Acts 13: 5). In Macedonia, there was synagogues in *Berea* (Acts 17: 10) and *Thessalonica* (Acts 17: 1). In Greece, there were synagogues in *Corinth* (Acts 18: 1) and in *Athens* (Acts 17: 17). From other sources¹⁵, we know that in addition to all the places mentioned in NT, there existed in the 1st century BC synagogues in among others in *Caesarea*, *Alexandria*, *Rome*, *Ostia*, *Cyrenaica*, *Delos* and *Bosporus*.

The Origin

There have been attempts among researchers to find connections to OT, without finding any clear fundamentals. Since there is no concrete data on the origin of the synagogue, many different theories have arisen over time. Professor L. Levine who is one of the leading researchers on synagogues, writes about the current research situation when it comes to its origin:

“During the last century, the perceptions among professionals have generally been divided into three: a time period from the 7th century BC with a focus on Josiah’s reforms, a place in Babylon after captivity in the 6th century, or a place to read the Torah in Jerusalem from the 5th century BC.”¹⁶

The theory he mentions: “*or a place to read the Torah in Jerusalem from the fifth century BC*”, refers to the synagogue taking its form after the reading of Ezra and Nehemiah had placed importance on the reading of the law for the Jews that went to their cities in Judea, in addition to the Jews in the diaspora. The research book *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* has this to say:

¹⁴ Jews that settled down in other places than in Palestine are called diaspora Jews. Diaspora comes from the Greek word “*diaspora*” which means dispersion.

¹⁵ See Levine (2000) p.75-113

¹⁶ Levine (2000) p. 23

“Many [of the Jews who did not go to Judea after captivity in Babylon] chose to continue to live in the Persian diaspora. This kind of decision clearly shows that their religious need was met there. Actually, cuneiform records show and archive a Jewish community in Babylon that retained the Yahwist identity”¹⁷.

A New Theory

After coming close to the problem of the origin of the synagogue in a new way, Professor Levine comes up with a new and quite interesting theory in the book *The Ancient Synagogue*:

“I want to propose another starting point, namely in a time period where we have solid evidence of what the synagogue was and how it functioned. Equipped with the knowledge we have about the synagogue while it appears in history’s full light, can we look at an earlier time period and ask ourselves where these activities that were performed in the synagogue were located. We can form an inkling about how, why and what the institution that was talked about in the first century as a synagogue (or a proseuch, sometime earlier in Egypt) first developed.”¹⁸

What facts do one have about the synagogue from the 1st century? Levine continues:

“As documented in contemporary sources the building could have been used as a courtroom, school or shelter, or for political meetings, social gatherings, storing of charitable funds, freed slaves, meals (sacred or other), and of course religious liturgical activities”¹⁹.

With this as a starting point, he searched for a location or locations where one could recognize most of this if not all, and guess what he found. Let’s take a look at what happened in a city gate in the time of The Old Testament.

The City Gate

Levine quotes the *Encyclopaedia Biblica* which says this about the city gate:

“For an ancient Hebrew, the city gate was more than a place to enter and exit and much more than a part of the city’s defence. It was also a “centrepiece” (even if it was only on one side) for the city’s social, economic and juridical matters”²⁰.

This is validated by a closer study of OT. Here are a few examples of what could happen one the city gate.



Figure 5 An illustration of a city gate in Israel

¹⁷ *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, p. 252

¹⁸ Levine (2000) p. 26,27

¹⁹ op. Cit p. 27

²⁰ op Cit.

- There was usually an open space immediately inside the city gate where people could meet (Nehemiah 8: 1; 1 Chronicles 32: 6)
- The city's eldest processed cases and made judgements in the city gate (Deuteronomy 16: 18; 21: 18-21; 22: 15; 25: 7)
- Prophets often preached their messages in the city gates (1 Kings 22: 10, Jeremiah 17: 19, Amos 5: 10)
- Also, other important messages were announced (2 Chronicles 32: 6-8)
- Sometimes the law was read by the city gates (Neh. 8: 1-3)
- Another way that shows it was known that the word of God was read by the city gate is that Proverbs 1: 20, 21; 8:1-3 talks about how the 'Wisdom' is shouted by the entrance to the city gate so that everyone could be educated.

These examples show that the city gate was a place for gathering, where the judgement was passed and announced and where the law sometimes was read. When it comes to archaeological findings of city gates, Levine writes: "Archaeological data confirms the fact that the biblical (that is, the iron age) gate was the place where many official businesses. ... the rooms ... were open towards the main passage and were either two, four or six in number, and could sometimes be of a spacious size (in one case it reached a length of nine meters). They often contained benches and stone water pools. These areas, and more importantly, the adjoining open areas were usually inside the gate, but sometimes outside the gate (in such cases there often was an additional surrounding wall) and were used for many civil businesses as mentioned above".²¹

With time the construction of the walls was changed and thus also the area around the city gate. Levine writes about the change he believes happened:

"In the Hellenistic period, the previous functions that were connected to the city gate and adjoining squares, moved to a building that became known as a synagogue. One necessary change was when the biblical city gate was transformed from a centre for urban activities to function as a simple gate for entering and exiting"²².

This was true for the Jews that had their own cities, but what about those who had moved to foreign cities, without the possibility of meeting inside the city gate? To this, Levine writes:

"The Jews that settled down in Egypt and other places in the Hellenistic period would not have a place for their communal activities, just as in Judea they had had a city gate. By adapting to a new environment and searching for a place for their joint activities, the Jews in Egypt and the entire diaspora sought their immediate surroundings after fitting models"²³.

The question is where it all began, in Judea or the diaspora. Levine finishes his theory by saying:

«There is little to collect by arguing about whether the synagogue has its origin in Judea or the diaspora. Actually, the institution evolved in both places more or less simultaneously, but by completely different causes. For the Jews in Palestine the a need to find an alternative to the city gate or the open public space which now was rapidly disappearing. For Jews in the

²¹ Levine (2000) p. 30

²² L. Levine (2000) p. 32, 33

²³ L. Levine (2000) p. 32,33

Hellenistic and later Roman diaspora, was the use of the hedonic city gate (if it still existed in its former communal cantered form) out of the question; that is why it was essential to create a place to conserve and express their joint identity in a foreign environment. It was in these circumstances that the synagogue and the proseukhe were born.”²⁴

There is also a linguistic indication in Targum²⁵ that can support the idea that the synagogue began at the city gates. It stands in the *Coniectanea Biblica New Testament series 37*:

“According to Targum, Amos attacked his opponents with the following words: “You who persecute the innocent to take money by deception and distort the cause of those in need in your synagogues!” the words “in your synagogues” is Targum’s replacement for [bsar] “in the gate”, in MT. The same exchange of words happens later in the same Targum: “Hate to make evil and love to make good, create justice in your synagogues!”. It is obvious that Targum, even if it does not give any utterance of the origin of ‘the synagogue, it is understood that the synagogue is the place where activities connected to the city gate in Amos’ time take place”²⁶.

Conclusion

Even if it is a coincidence that the origin of the synagogue should have arisen at the city gate, it is important to remember that there is only one theory among many others, some are more plausible than others. The fact remains that after overwhelming probability the research book *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* expresses it:

“The origin, the date and the historical development of the synagogue is shrouded in obscurity. Due to the lack of sources and records, it is impossible to say anything with certainty.”²⁷

²⁴ op.Cit, p. 41

²⁵ Targum is an Aramaic freely translation of several parts of OT. The final form of the translation is dated to the 5th century AD

²⁶ CB37 p. 88

²⁷ TDNT Vol VII, p. 810

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Figure 1. Bible Illustrations, by G. Dore - in Norwegian (creationism.org)

Figure 2. 568px-Josephus.jpg (568×719) (wikimedia.org)

Figure 3.

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/4/4d/8V2A3067_%2847715698331%29.jpg/1280px-8V2A3067_%2847715698331%29.jpg

Figure 4.

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/f/fb/Sites_of_Christianity_in_the_Galilee_-_Ruins_of_the_ancient_Great_Synagogue_at_Capernaum_%28or_Kfar_Nahum%29_on_the_shore_of_the_Lake_of_Galilee%2C_Northern_Israel.jpg/1280px-thumbnail.jpg

Figure 5 <https://s3.amazonaws.com/focus.cinevee.com/ttwmk-live/product/>