

The Synagogue Part 2

The architecture and financing of the synagogue

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In part 2, we will examine the synagogue's internal and external formation. We will also discuss a storage room or a place in the synagogue called geniza. We will also examine how the building and running of the synagogue were financed.

Architecture

It is difficult to know exactly how the synagogues in the 1st century AD looked since there are few archaeological finds, and the few that do exist are usually just ruins. However, one could still draw some conclusions by using the few archaeological finds together with the written sources.

Exterior

It is clear that a building that would function as a synagogue did not necessarily need to have a particular look or size. It becomes apparent when one compares the ruins in Masada, Gamla and Herodium. The original building in Masada was a rectangular house with measurements of 12x15 meters, the one in Gamla measures the synagogue's main room to 19,5x15 meters, while the synagogue in Herodium is a remodelled triclinium¹.



Figure 1 Ruin of a synagogue in Gamla

After studying the previously mentioned archaeological finds, in addition to the ruins of Delos, the researcher L. Levine concludes like this: “Moreover, the differences between these buildings are remarkable, and collectively it makes a strong argument against the assumption of a simple typology ... On the grounds of these differences, it would seem quite unjustified to talk about one simple type of synagogue in ‘the second time period’. What we have is a long line of buildings that could have served this kind of purpose”².

Interior

When it comes to the interior architecture, it seems that the synagogues are relatively similar. The research book *The Encyclopaedia of Judaism* says: “The innermost room in these buildings is arranged in the same manner. The room is rectangular and surrounded by pillars on three or four of the sides, where there are also rows of benches”³. The benches were then placed in a way that there was an open space in the middle of the building. Some places in the synagogue were seen as more important than others, something that Jesus noticed when he said where the teachers would sit in the synagogue: “Watch out for the

¹ Triclinium is a concept for a Roman room that was used as a dining room. Furnished with three chaises placed in an u. In this time period people ate lying down.

² Levine (1987) p. 11, 12

³ The Encyclopaedia of Judaism, Bind 4, p. 2565

teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and have **the most important seats in the synagogue.**” (Mark 12:38, 39), Talmud talks about how these places were organized: “The eldest sit with their faces towards the people...”⁴.

That there was a hierarchical placement of the congregation comes from the Dead Sea scrolls, which describes how the placement in the assembly was organized in the Qumran settlement: “This is the rule of the Congregation: Each man should sit in their own place. The priest shall sit on the first row, the eldest on the second row, and thereafter the people according to their rank”⁵.

One of the most important objects in the synagogue was the ark where one stored the priceless scrolls wrapped in linen. In the earlier synagogue, this ark was moveable, while later there was a special room created/built for storing scrolls. (More about this later in the article).

According to the book *History of the Jewish People* there existed a podium or platform with a lectern: “For the reader and the one that should preach it was, at least in the later time periods, a raised area where the lectern stood. Both [the raised area and the **lectern**] are mentioned in the Jerusalemite Talmud and probably existed in the time of The New Testament”⁶.

Imagine Jesus in the synagogue in his hometown Nazareth, where he is known as the carpenter’s son, walking up on the podium and placing himself by the lectern, the synagogue attendant collects the Isaiah scroll from the ark, unwrapping/unpacking the scroll from the linen and holds it out for Him. If the Isaiah scroll was like the one found in Qumran (dated before the time of Christ) he would have to scroll a long way before he found the place he was supposed to read from, and then Jesus begins to read while the teachers sit facing the congregation.

“He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight of the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour”. Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him” (Luke 4:16-20).

Decoration

The synagogues in the 1st century were sparsely decorated which is due to the strict adherence to Exodus 20:4: “You shall not make for yourself an image the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below.” With time this commandment was not perceived as strictly, and from the 3rd century AD, there have been found synagogues that are richly decorated, even with motifs of the zodiac with the sun sign in the middle and naked human bodies⁷.

⁴ tMeg 4:2, The History of the Jewish people, Bind 2, p. 449

⁵ The History of the Jewish people, Bind I, p. 447

⁶ The History of the Jewish People, Bind II, p. 446. But there are no archaeological finds that prove this from that time

⁷ Den Nytestamentlige Historie p. 259,260

Geniza

When a scroll was worn or damaged it was replaced with a new one, while the old scroll was placed in a storage room called a geniza. In 1890 an amazing discovery was made in the Ben Ezra synagogue in Cairo. When the synagogue was excavated, a geniza containing 90,000 fragments and manuscripts was found, some dating back to the 6th century AD.

The researcher Paul E. Kahle writes in the book *The Cairo Geniza*: “The Jews used to dispose of all kinds of texts and printed matter in such rooms that were set up in or near their synagogues. It was not meant to be stored in an archive, but they were supposed to be there without being touched for a certain amount of time. The Jews were afraid that such texts, which might contain the name of God, might otherwise be desecrated by being misused. Such written, and later printed, documents would at one time be brought to concentrated ground and buried. This is how they were disintegrated. It was only a coincidence that the geniza in Cairo was forgotten and thus its contents avoided the fate of other genizas”⁸.



Figure 2 The Ben Ezra synagogue



Figure 3 A possible Geniza in Masada

Financing

To build and maintain the synagogue was a task for the congregation and in contemporary Palestine it would mean that the local population. In Mishna, the synagogue was described as belonging to the town equal to the baths and the streets. When it concerns the financing, the research book, the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*: “Synagogues were built with the help of communal funds, either through taxes or gifts and bequests. According to the Tosefta⁹, any Jew could be forced to contribute to the construction of a synagogue”¹⁰.

An example of a private initiative is shown in the Theodotus inscription: “Theodotus, son of Vettenu, priest and synagogue-president, son of a synagogue-president and grandson of a synagogue-president, has built the synagogue”¹¹.

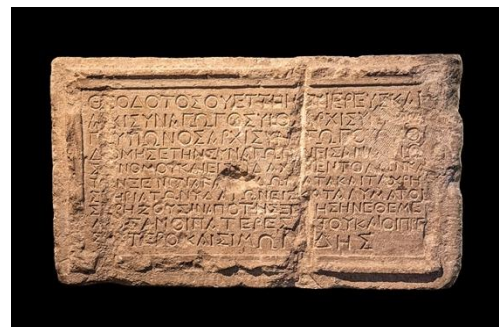


Figure 4 The Theodotus inscription

⁸ The Cairo Geniza (1959) p. 4

⁹ Author’s note: Tosefta means supplement or addition and was seen as an addition to the Mishna

¹⁰ Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Bind VII, p. 813

¹¹ Biblical Archaeology, p. 240

Even non-Jews contributed to the Jews getting synagogues, we have an example of this mentioned in Luke 7: 2-5: “There a centurion’s servant, whom his master valued highly, was sick and about to die. The centurion heard of Jesus and sent some elders of the Jews to him, asking him to come and heal his servant. When they came to Jesus, they pleaded earnestly with him, “This man deserves to have you do this, because he loves our nation and has built our synagogue””.

Even if it was rare that non-Jews built synagogues for Jews, there have been several inscriptions found that prove this. One example of this is the Acmonia inscription found in Phrygia, dated to the first century AD: “The edifice was constructed by Julia Severa. Publius Tyrronios Clados, archisynagogos for life, Lucius son of Lucius, *archisynagogos*, and Popilios Zoticos, archon, have renovated [the building] from their own funds and from the community treasury ... The synagogue honours these individuals with a gold shield on account of their excellent leadership and their kindly feelings toward and zeal for the congregation”¹².

It was also possible to give gifts to the synagogue. Some inscriptions show that people gave, for example, scrolls and lamps as gifts.

In the next part of this series, we will take a closer look at what happened in a synagogue in the time of Christ and his Apostles.

¹² Levine (2000) p. 111

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Figure sources

Figure 1

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gamla_Synagogue_00.jpg

Figure 2

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ben_Ezra_Synagogue_Interior.jpg

Figure 3

https://commons.m.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Synagogue_massada_3.jpg#mw-jump-to-license

Figure 4

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