

The Synagogue Part 3

The Function of the Synagogue
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The Usage of the Synagogue

The synagogue has never been a competitor to the temple, if that had been the case, Jesus would probably never have gone there, “and on the Sabbath day [Jesus] went to the synagogue, as was his custom” (Luk 4: 16). Primarily, it was used for service, but as we will see later in this series about the synagogue, it had several uses. In this part, we will look at what happened during the service.

The Service

The most important thing that happened in a synagogue was the sermon, which consisted of praise, prayer, readings from the *Torah* and the prophets, as well as preaching and teaching. *Store norske leksikon* says this about the *Torah*: “The *Torah* is Judaism’s first and holiest collection of religious texts. It consists of the Five Books of Moses, which tell of the period from the creation of the world to Moses’ death on Mount Nebo”¹. The word *Torah* is Hebrew and means to guide, instruct, and law”². The *Torah* is often called the *Pentateuch* which is Greek and means “the five scrolls or the five books”. Sometimes the *Torah* is also called the *Law*.



Figure 1 an example of a *Torah*, on display in the State Museum of Cologne

Prayer and Blessings

Scholars dispute the extent of communal prayer in the synagogue at the time of Jesus. Professor L. Levine says: “The most problematic component of synagogue worship in the Second Temple period is that of communal prayer”³.

The reason there is a challenge is that there are few sources from the 1st century AD that refer to it. But that there was some form of prayer in the synagogue, there is no doubt about it. In Matthew 6:5, Jesus says: “And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others”.

Something else that proves that prayers happened in the synagogue is that in the diaspora, the synagogue was called a *proseuch*⁴ which means “place of prayer”.

¹ Toraen – Store norske leksikon (snl.no)

² Brown F., Driver S., Briggs C., Hebrew and English Lexicon, p. 436

³ Levine, L., The Ancient Synagogue the First Thousand Years p. 151

⁴ You can read more about *proseuch* in part 1 of this series

But whether there were long prayers before and after the reading of the *Torah* and the prophets, we do not know for sure. After having discussed the question about communal prayer, Professor Levine writes: “Nevertheless, it is quite possible that some blessings were recited in synagogues in Judea as well as in the Diaspora. Although only finding expression in the *Mishna* and *Tosefta*, blessings before and after the reading of the Torah reading may have already been a customary practice in the first century”⁵.

The blessing that Levine refers to is the *Shema*, which is mentioned in the *Mishna*⁶ and which should be recited before and after the reading of the *Torah*. The *Shema* is to this day thought of as the Jewish creed and is collected from Deuteronomy 6: 4-9; 11: 13-21, and Numbers 15: 37-41. The creed got its name, *Shema*, after the first Hebrew word in Deuteronomy 6: 4, which is *Shema* and is translated to Hear! in Norwegian and English. The fact that there existed in the time of Jesus gets confirmed by a found papyrus, the Nash Papyrus. This is dated to the 2nd or 1st century BC and contains a complex exhortative text that was supposed to remind the Jew of his obligation to God.

Reading and Teaching

We know more about reading and teaching with certainty. From what we can understand from the existing sources, was reading and teaching from the Scripture the most important function of the synagogue. The *Theodotus* inscription says “Theodotus . . . , has built **the synagogue for the reading of the Law and teaching of the Commandments**”.

In the New Testament (NT), this is also shown again and again: “[Jesus] **teaching people in their synagogues**” (Matt 4:23, see also 9:35 and 13:54) “and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up **to read**” (Luk 4:16). “On another Sabbath he went into the synagogue and was **teaching**” (Luk 6:6).

The Greek-Jewish philosopher *Philon* (20 BC – 50 AD) writes “Therefore, he [Emperor Augustus] knew that they have synagogues, and that they were in the habit of visiting them, and most especially on the sacred sabbath days, when they publicly cultivate their national philosophy⁷. He knew also that they were in the habit of contributing sacred sums of money from their first fruits and sending them to Jerusalem by the hands of those who were to conduct the sacrifices”⁸.



Figure 2 Philon

The Jewish historian *Josephus* (37 AD – ca. 100 AD) writes: “He [Moses] appointed the Law to be the most excellent and necessary form of guidance, a regulation, not for it to be heard only once, or twice or several occasions. But for men, every week to leave their errands and gather to listen to the *Law* and to get a thorough and accurate knowledge of it, a custom that every other law-abiding seems to have neglected”⁹.



Figure 3 Flavius Josephus

⁵ Levine, L., *The Ancient Synagogue the First Thousand Years* p. 156-7

⁶ mMegillah 4: 3 (*The Mishna, A New Translation*, 1988, Neusner Jacob)

⁷ Author’s comment: both Philon and Josephus talks about the Jews’ teachings as philosophy

⁸ *The Works of Philo Judaeus*, Embassy 156 (<http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/yonge/book40.html>)

⁹ *Against Apion* Book II, 18 retold in Levine (1987) p. 16

In the *Mishna* it is described in detail what should be read. “On the new moon of Adar which coincided with the Sabbath, they read [Ex. 30:11-16] ... and on the next Sabbath they read [Dt. 25:17-19]”¹⁰.



Figure 4 Mishna

Reading of the Law – a Historical retrospective

The reading of the *Law*¹¹ was an important part of the Jews’ religious life. The first time a public reading of the *Law* is mentioned in Exodus 24:7 “Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people. They responded, “We will do everything the Lord has said; we will obey.””

On different occasions, should the *Law* also be read for the Israelites, both young and old. “Assemble the people – men, women and children, and the foreigners residing in your towns – so they can listen and learn to fear the Lord your God and follow carefully all the words of this law. Their children, who do not know this law, must hear it and learn to fear the Lord your God as long as you live in the land you are crossing the Jordan to possess” (Dt. 31:12,13).



Figure 5 Moses with the Ten Commandments

After that, the Israelites had entered the promised land and were gathered and Joshua read the law to them. “Afterward, Joshua read all the words of the law – the blessings and the curses – just as it is written in the Book of the Law. There was not a word of all that Moses had commanded that Joshua did not read to the whole assembly of Israel, including the women and children, and the foreigners who lived among them.” (Joshua 8:34 -35)

Later, when Jehoshaphat was king of Judah, he made sure that the *Law* was read all over the Kingdom of Judah. “In the third year of his reign he sent his officials ... to teach in the towns of Judah. ... They taught throughout Judah, taking with them the Book of the Law of the Lord; they went around to all the towns of Judah and taught the people.” (2 Chronicles 17:7, 9)

Some hundred years later when Josiah was king, he assembled all of Judah so that they could hear the Law: “He went up to the temple of the Lord with the people of Judah, the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the priests and the prophets – all the people from the least to the greatest. He read in their hearing all the words of the Book of the Covenant, which had been found in the temple of the Lord.” (2 Kings 23:2)

When the Jews had come home from the seventy-year-long exile in Babylon, Ezra made sure that the Law was read: “When the seventh month came and the Israelites had settled in their towns, all the people came together as one in the square before the Watergate. They told Ezra the teacher of the Law to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the Lord had commanded for Israel ... They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was said.” (Nehemiah 8:1, 8)



Figure 6 Ezra reads from the law

¹⁰ mMegillah 3. 4. (The Mishna, A New Translation, 1988, Neusner Jacob)

¹¹ The Laws in this context probably refer to the laws we find in Exodus – Deuteronomy.

It seems like after this time the official reading of the Law began to take a more regular shape. Levine writes: “The chronological parameters are probably to be fixed between the fifth and third centuries BC”¹².

In the Books of Maccabee¹³, it is clear that the Law had a great influence on the Jews in the 1st century BC “And they opened the book of the law to inquire into those matters about which the nations consulted the likeness of their gods.” (1. Maccabee 3:48); “Encouraging them from the Law and the Prophets and reminding them also of the struggles they had won, he had made them more eager” (2 Maccabee 15:9).



Figure 7 Judas Maccabees

Reading of the *Torah* in the synagogue

In the 1st century AD, the *Torah* still had quite a big influence on the Jews, which is proven by that it was seen as the holiest object besides the temple¹⁴.

The reading of the *Torah* in the synagogue had a significant role, as shown by the following quotes from the NT. “From Perga they went on to Pisidian Antioch. On the Sabbath they entered the synagogue and sat down. After reading from the Law ...” (Act 13:14, 15); “For the law of Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath” (Act 15:21); “Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts” (2 Cor 3:15)



Figure 8 Reading of the *Torah*

And *Philon* says in *Hypothetica* 7. 12: “What then did he do on this sabbath day? He commanded all the people to assemble together in the same place, and sitting down with one another, to listen to the laws.”¹⁵

Josephus writes in *Against Apion* 2, 175: “He [Moses] made a fixed rule of law...to be the best and the most necessary instruction of all others, permitting the people to leave off their other employments, and to assemble together for the hearing of the law, and learning it exactly, and this not once or twice, or oftener, but every week; which thing all the other legislators seem to have neglected”¹⁶

The *Mishna* states that the Jews not only gathered in the synagogue on the Sabbath and holidays, but also Mondays and Thursdays: “On Monday, Thursday, and the Sabbath at the afternoon service, three read [in the *Torah*]”¹⁷.

¹² Levine, L., *The Ancient Synagogue the First Thousand Years* p. 139

¹³ Quote from bibelen.no (Norwegian Bible Company), 1. Maccabee dates to the second half of the second century BC, 2. Maccabee dates to between 134 BC and 70 BC.

¹⁴ Levine, L., *The Ancient Synagogue The First Thousand Years* p. 135ff

¹⁵ *The Works of Philo Judaeus, Hypothetica*, <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/yonge/book37.html>

¹⁶ *Against Apion* 2. 175

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgibin/ptext?doc=Perseus:text:1999.01.0216:book=2:section=173>

¹⁷ *mMegillah* 4.1 (*The Mishna, A New Translation*, 1988, Neusner Jacob)

The reason for it being Mondays and Thursdays is commented on by *Peter Pauldan* in the book *Den nytestamentlige historie*: “However, it is certain that it was a prevalent practice, and that while the temple still existed, to hold at least morning and afternoon services on Sabbaths and feast days. These two days were market days when people came to the city”¹⁸.

This is also something the research book *The Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature* concludes with: “The time of the public service was ... Mondays and Thursdays. These were the two market days of the week when the villagers brought their products to the neighbouring town. In Addition to bringing up matters with the local Sanhedrin which was located in the synagogue”¹⁹.

Details About the Reading

If you wanted to stand or sit when you were going to read and comment on the scroll, it was your own choice. The *Mishna* states that: “He who reads the Scroll stands or sits”²⁰. This also seems to be the case when you commented on what was being read. For example, Jesus sat when he commented on what he had read in the Isaiah Scroll, (Luk 4:20), while Paul stood when he was teaching (Act 14:14-16).

The reading was not random but followed predetermined sectioned paragraphs so that in a cycle of 3 ½ years, one had read through the entire *Torah*. But in some places, it only took 1 year. One explanation for why it took a longer time in some places could be that there was a need to translate from Hebrew to the locally understood language. Mostly, it was Greek, but in some places, it could be Aramaic. If such 1 and 3 ½ year cycles have existed at the same time, what cycle was first, and why did one of the cycles come before the other, there is a big debate. But the fact that there was a form of a cycle at the time of Jesus is certain to be the case.

To read from the law or the prophets was not reserved for any specific people; any male in the congregation was allowed to read. For example, the carpenter's son Jesus, who did not have any special kind of education, was allowed to read when he visited his hometown, Nazareth. “[Jesus] went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read” (Luke 4: 16) Underage boys could also read as the *Mishna* says: “A minor reads the Torah and translates”²¹. The one who read the Torah did not have to wear some special kind of clothes, but the clothes should not be ragged: “He who is wearing ragged clothing ... does not read the Torah”²².

¹⁸ Den Nytestamentlige Historie, Pedersen Sigfred. p. 262

¹⁹ McClintock J & Strong J., Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological And Ecclestical Literature Vol 10, p. 242

²⁰ Megillah 4:1 (The Mishna, A New Translation, 1988, Neusner Jacob)

²¹ mMegillah 4: 6 II (The Mishna, A New Translation, 1988, Neusner Jacob)

²² mMegillah 4: 6 III (The Mishna, A New Translation, 1988, Neusner Jacob)

Reading of the Prophets

After a certain paragraph from the *Torah* was read on the morning of the Sabbath, a piece from the prophets was read. “He [Jesus] stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him.” (Luke 4: 16, 17); “After the reading from the Law and the Prophets, the of the synagogue sent word to them [Paul and Barnabas] ...” (Act. 13: 15).

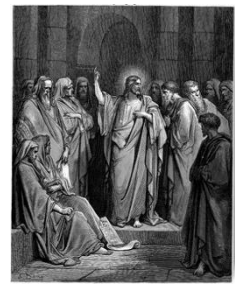


Figure 9 Christ in the Synagogue by Gustav Dore

This also appears in the *Mishna*, in a discussion of the reading of the law it is said: “They conclude with a reading of the prophetic lection”²³. The reading of the prophets consisted of a few verses. Jesus read from Isaiah 61:1, 2, the *Mishna* mentioned that one could read 3-5 verses²⁴. One does not know if at the time of Jesus, there was a set prophetic text that was supposed to be read or if it was chosen by the reader.

Only after the year 200 AD are there written testimonies that show that there were specific paragraphs from the prophets that were to be read. These paragraphs were in one way, or another linked to the text that had just been read.

Translation

It was first in the 4th century AD one finds records that show that it was read directly from the translations in the synagogue. Before this time, both the *Torah* and the prophets were read in Hebrew. Because the Hebrew language, at least in the diaspora, was not spoken regularly, there was a need to translate the reading into the most common language, which at this time was Greek and Aramaic. The *Torah* was translated verse by verse, but when it concerned the prophets, one could read three verses before it was translated. The *Mishna* says “He may not read to the translator more than a single verse [at a time, so the translator will not err], and in case of the prophetic lection, three”²⁵.

Teaching

An important and prominent part of the synagogue’s service on the Sabbath was the teaching, something that is mentioned several times in the NT. “They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law.” (Mark 1:21, 22); “I have spoken openly to the world,” Jesus replied. “I have always taught in the Synagogue or at the temple, where all the Jews come together” (John 18: 20).

We also have many examples that Paul taught in the synagogue. “From Perga they [Paul and his entourage] went on to Pisidian Antioch. On the Sabbath they entered the synagogue and sat down. 15 After the reading from the Law and the Prophets, the leaders of the synagogue sent word to them, saying, “Brothers, if you have a word of exhortation for the people, please

²³ mMegillah 4: 2 III K (The Mishna, A New Translation, 1988, Neusner Jacob)

²⁴ tMegillah 3: 18 (The Mishna, A New Translation, 1988, Neusner Jacob)

²⁵ mMegillah 4: 4 BC (The Mishna, A New Translation, 1988, Neusner Jacob)

speak.” Standing up, Paul motioned with his hand and said...” This speech continues over 30 verses (Acts 13:14-41).

Another example of Paul’s teaching in the synagogue is found in Acts 19:8: “Paul entered the synagogue and spoke boldly there for three months, arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God”. The Greek word *dialegomai*, which here is translated to “spoke” may also mean more formal speeches, and according to a Greek-English lexicon, it may mean: “To speak in a somewhat more formal setting and probably implying a more formal use of language – ‘to address, to make a speech’”²⁶.



Figure 10 Rabbi that discusses the Talmud

That the Jews emphasised the teaching in the synagogue is also pointed out by *Philo*: “For it was invariably the custom, as it was desirable on other days also, but especially on the seventh day, as I have already explained, to discuss matters of philosophy”²⁷.

We also have the previously mentioned Theodotus inscription, found in Jerusalem, that shows that there are teachings in the synagogue: “Theodotus, son of Vettenus, priest and synagogue-president ... has built the synagogue for the ... teaching of the Commandments”²⁸.



Figure 11 The Theodotus inscription

Since the sources from this time are limited, it is difficult to say with any certainty how the teaching was carried out. There are some differences between the NT and *Philo*. According to *Philo*, there were specially selected people with an education who taught, while Jesus, who did not have a formal education, was allowed to teach in the synagogue. But, there is no doubt that there was teaching in the synagogue.

Jesus Teaches in the Synagogue Stands Out

When we discuss teaching in the Synagogue, it is interesting to note that the evangelist Mark writes about Jesus’ teaching in the synagogue: “They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law”. (Mark 1:21, 22)

What was it about Jesus’ teaching that stood out from the that of the teachers? The book *Robertson’s Word Pictures* explains: “They [the Jews] had heard many sermons before from the regular rabbis in the synagogue. We have specimens of these discourses in the Mishna and the Gemara ... the scribes quoted the rabbis before them and were afraid of expressing an

²⁶ Louw & Nida Greek NT Lexicon, word nr: 33.26 (Bible Works 4.0)

²⁷ The Works of Philo Judaeus, Moses 2, 215,16 <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/yonge/book25.html>

²⁸ For the entire inscription see part 1 of this series.

idea without bolstering it up by a predecessor. Jesus spoke with the authority of truth, the reality and freshness of the morning light, and the power of God's spirit"²⁹.

As a commentary to the scribes quoting rabbis *John Lightfoot* says in the book *A Commentary on the New Testament – From the Talmud and Hebraica*: “The scribes borrowed credit to their doctrine from traditions, and the fathers of them: and no sermon of any scribe had any authority or value, without ... ‘The wise men say’; or ... ‘Hillel the Great taught truly’... But, although he [the scribe] discoursed of that matter all day long, ... they received not his doctrine, until he said at last, ‘So I heard from Shemaia and Abtalion’³⁰”³¹.

This is in great contrast to Jesus' preaching, which never quoted a rabbi but referred to either himself or the scripture. One example of this is when Jesus one night talks with Nicodemus, the Pharisee. “Jesus replied, “Very truly **I tell you**, no one can see the kingdom of God ... Very truly **I tell you**, no one can enter the Kingdom unless they are born of water and the Spirit” (Joh. 3:3, 5). In another case, Jesus says: “**It is written**, ... My house will be called a house of prayer, but you are making it a den of robbers” (Matt. 21:13).

It was not only the method of how Jesus taught in the synagogue that made a strong impression, but also the actual message. The research book *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* says in connection with this, “Jesus not only explained the scripture in the OT in the synagogue, he also preached here the message of God's basileia [kingdom]”³².

In this part, we have concentrated on the actual service in the synagogue. In the next part, we will discuss what other role the synagogue had in the Jewish community in the 1st century.

²⁹ Word Pictures in the New Testament, 1930. Robinson A. T, Vol. I p. 63

³⁰ Author's comment: Sjemia and Abtalion was very recognized rabbis in the 1st century BC

³¹ A Commentary on the New Testament - From the Talmud and Hebraica. J. Lightfoot, Vol. 2, p. 159

³² Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Vol. VII, p. 832

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